HIPSTATEASEE

ICE COLD

1. 01
2. 02
3. 03
4. 04
5. 05
6. 06
7. 07
8. 08
9. 09
10. 10
11. 11
12. 12
13. 13
14. 14
15. 15
16. 16
17. 17
18. 18
19. 19
20. 20
21. 21
22. 22
23. 23
24. 24
25. 25
26. 26
27. 27
28. 28
29. 29
30. 30
31. 31
32. 32
33. 33
34. 34
35. 35
36. 36

37. 37
38. 38
39. 39
40. 40
41. 41
42. 42
43. 43
44. 44
45. 45
46. 46
47. 47
48. 48
49. 49
50. 50
51. 51
52. 52
53. 53
54. Epilogue
55. Q&A

01

Wren Ridley

I was following the cracks in the sidewalk, somewhere in Providence between Brown and my favorite coffee shop, when I bumped into him. The cracks zig zagged across the pavement, forming a sort of natural map in the earth with greenery growing through them. They were my mile markers, how I knew how far I had gone and how far I had left to go.

I never used to run, hating the feeling of my chest getting heavy and my breath picking up as I went on. As I started doing it more, I grew to love it.

It was part of an escape from my life. My headphones in my ears blocked out the world around me and left me to my own thoughts. And that did nothing to stop my constant overthinking. But I loved the solitude. Being able to overthink without anyone else noticing. It was like I had tunnel vision, only staring straight ahead.

It would make sense if I physically ran into people more often, but it had never happened until now. I collided with a body, sending us both backward and knocking the other guy on the ground.

"Watch where you're going asshole," the guy spat, glaring up at me as he shoved himself off the ground.

I took one earbud out and held my hand up to my ear as if I was having trouble hearing him.

"What was that?" I asked, though I had heard him perfectly.

"I said watch where the fuck you're going," he replied in a sharp tone, his eyes looking as if they were trying to pierce my skin.

I couldn't help but notice the guy looked incredibly familiar and it only took me about two more seconds to figure out why. The guy standing in front of

me was Landon, at least I thought that was his name. Or was it Lance? No, Landon.

I never forgot faces, but names were a different story.

I never really knew Landon personally, only from the times he had tried beating up my brother in some homophobic rage back when they were in high school. And for that, I wasn't very fond of the kid.

"Well, you'll just have to get out of my way next time," I told him with a shrug. This only seemed to anger him more.

"Or you could not run people over in the middle of the park," he answered through gritted teeth.

I just shrugged again. "Don't wanna get run over, then move out of the way."

Landon tightly set his jaw, but his expression softened as he stared at me. A look of realization settled on his face.

"I know you from somewhere," he said in a slow voice, pointing at me like he was trying to place where he knew me from. "I just don't know where."

"Can't help you with that," I told him, putting my earbud back in and jogging away before the boy said anything else.

I finished my route and headed back to my dorm just as James was waking up. My roommate was never one to wake up early, and he always complained about me being too loud when I got back from my morning runs.

James and I didn't exchange any words as I began stripping from my running clothes. He watched me from where he sat on his bed, running his fingers through his hair.

"Hey, Wren," he started, causing me to turn and face him after throwing my shirt into my hamper. "Do you wanna fuck?"

I snorted out a laugh and shook my head, continuing to take off my clothes.

"It's, like, nine in the morning," I told him, grabbing my things for a shower. "It's a little early for that."

James shrugged. "I can't help when I wanna do it."

I shook my head at him, going toward the door.

"Take care of it yourself," I said before leaving the room to go to the shower.

James and I didn't have sex often. It only happened a few times, but he was the first guy I had ever been with. I had a feeling about my sexuality for a long time, especially when I was suspecting my brother, Fox, was not straight. But it wasn't until I got to college, and got with James, that I knew for sure.

I quickly washed myself in the shower and wrapped a towel around my waist as I headed back to the dorm room. When I got in there, Stella was standing over James's bed and hitting him with my pillow.

Stella was one of the first people I met at Brown, aside from James. They were the only two people I could spend a lot of time with here. Everyone else I could only take in small doses.

Without saying a word, I shut the door and opened up my closet before quickly changing into some new clothes. Stella paused from hitting James to turn and look at me as I buttoned my pants.

"Are you ready to go get some food or what?" she asked me with her eyebrows raised, pillow held up in the air.

"I guess," I told her, throwing on a shirt after putting some deodorant on then closing my closet door. "But I have class in, like, half an hour."

"Let's go," she said, throwing the pillow back onto my bed. "He says he's skipping today."

I shook my head at James as he rolled over to face the wall. We were only two weeks into the fall semester and he was already skipping classes. I wasn't going to tell him how irresponsible it was of him, but he would soon be staying up all hours of the night trying to catch up just like he had done the year before.

Stella and I left the dorms, walking down the brick pathway toward the closest dining hall.

"So what's the plan for this weekend?" Stella asked, her short legs moving fast to keep up with me.

I shrugged. "I might go home."

Stella let out a frustrated groan, looking at me with an irritated expression.

"That's lame!" she exclaimed. "We're on weekend number two and you're already going home?"

"My parents are going through heavy children withdrawals," I told her with a sigh.

She gave me a strange look. "Aren't your other siblings home?"

I shook my head. "My oldest brother is at UCLA, my older sister moved into an apartment with her school friends, and my younger brother is in his first year of college. They went from having four kids at home to two."

Mom and Dad had been blowing up my phone ever since I went off to school. They were probably doing it to the others as well, but it was most realistic that I would be able to go home.

Raven moved out over the summer. She wasn't far, but she was definitely enjoying the independence she never got since she commuted to college. Robin was too far away to come home, but it wasn't like he would even if he was closer. And Fox was in his first year and he was all alone in the city with his boyfriend, so we probably wouldn't see him for a while.

That left me getting their daily texts and questions asking me when I would be home next.

"You'd think they'd be happy with all you guys finally leaving," Stella joked as we made it to the dining hall.

"They're definitely not," I said, opening the door for her.

The dining hall always smelled of the same greasy foods in the morning. It made me miss home more than I'd like to admit. The food here was no match for Dad's cooking.

Stella and I walked through the room and grabbed plates. I waited in line for an omelet while she went over and made herself a waffle.

"I think you should stay tonight and go out with us and go home tomorrow," Stella suggested as we sat down with our food. "It's not like you drink anyway. You won't have a hangover."

I contemplated her words as I took a bite of my omelet. Stella always had a reasoning for everything and she could convince anyone of almost anything. She tried to use her charms on me, and sometimes I fell for them.

"Come on, Wren," she said. "We could find you a cute guy, me a cute girl, have a little fun."

She wiggled her eyebrows, trying to entice me to give in.

"Maybe I'll stay," I said and to that, Stella let out a squeal of excitement. "But it's not because of you, I just want to get laid."

"That's good enough for me!"

And so I did stay.

***

Landon Reilly

My morning had been going like the rest of my life had been. Inconvenient, painful, and annoying.

The side of my leg throbbed from where I fell after that stupid asshole knocked me down. The pain in my leg slowed me down, and now I was running behind schedule. I made it back to my dorm later than I would have liked and still had to get ready for class.

As I was gathering my things, my phone rang from my pocked and I let out a heavy sigh when I saw the caller ID before answering it.

"Yes Micah?" I answered, not even bothering to keep the annoyance out of my tone.

"Just checking up on you," he said in a light tone like he always did.

Sometimes I felt bad for Micah always having to put up with my shitty attitude. He and his family had taken me in when I needed them most, but I still wasn't used to people genuinely caring about me. That was why I was agitated every time Micah or one of his parents called me with their sickly sweet voices just to check up on me.

"I'm doing pretty much the same since we talked last night," I told him, this time trying to calm my voice as I held my phone between my shoulder and my ear and gathered my things.

"You just seemed kinda off last night," Micah commented.

I was always off by Micah's standards. Because to him, if I wasn't happy and polite, I was "off."

"I'm fine," I assured him, putting him on speaker so I could change my clothes.

"Did you still want to take the train up to Boston this weekend?" he asked me.

I had to hold in my sigh. Micah and I had just spoken about this the night before. I had already told him my plans hadn't changed and that I would be

going up to his school for the weekend. He was just worried that I would lock myself in my room all weekend if I stayed in Providence.

"You remember you have to get off at Back Bay and then get on the Green line at Copley?" Micah reminded me.

"Yes, Micah, I know," I replied. "It's not that hard to figure out."

"I just don't want you getting lost," he said.

"I'm not going to get lost."

I had finished getting dressed and gathered my things for class, then quickly left my room with my phone to my ear.

"Is that all you wanted?" I asked him as I left the building and headed toward my first class.

"I just wanted to check in," he reminded me. "You know, you can call *me* sometimes. Instead of me always calling you."

I rolled my eyes. "Maybe I would if you waited more than twelve hours between phone calls."

"Fine, I'll just not call you and wait for you to call me," Micah said, though his tone wasn't angry like his words seemed.

And I knew he was bluffing as soon as he said it. If I didn't call Micah by tomorrow night, he'd be calling me the next day.

"I'm running late to class, Micah, I gotta go," I said in a rushed tone as I ran up the stone steps toward the academic building.

"Okay," he replied. "Call me whenever."

I hung up the phone and slid it back into my pocket as I entered the academic building behind a group of girls.

By the time I made it to the classroom, the only seats that were left were toward the front of the room. I desperately looked around to find one toward the back, but I had no luck.

I dragged my feet to the front of the room, taking a seat at the end of the aisle next to a girl with a giant binder taking up most of the space between us on the table.

The people here had no manners. That was something I quickly learned on my first week of college. It was almost like a continuation of high school only with a bunch of unsupervised kids posing as adults. That was what it felt like in the dorms with people making a mess of the halls and being loud at all hours of the night.

Luckily, my roommate and I largely ignored each other. I opted not to room with anyone from the hockey team and instead chose to go random.

It was better that way. I didn't know if being with the hockey team 24/7 would be good for me and I didn't want to socialize that much anyway.

Here it was easier for be to fall into the background, and I couldn't tell if I preferred it that way. I was used to being the leader on my team and now I was some freshman that probably won't even get ice time. But there was no one looking to me to follow my lead, no one to fuel me in my brash actions.

No one that knew anything about me. And I preferred it that way. I wanted to melt into the background and go as unnoticed as possible.

That was the only way I'd make it through the year.

**

Hi everyone! Thanks for reading.

Just a reminder this is a spin off to "On Thin Ice." While it can be read as a stand alone, it'll make a lot more sense if you read OTI first.

Please let me know what you think! Any predictions for where the story is going?

02

Landon Reilly

The color of the leaves had already started changing drastically since the end of summer. Autumn was always my favorite season, the changing colors around me feeling like a new beginning.

I wasn't used to anyone being happy to see me, but Micah had a wide grin on his face when I stepped off the train in front of him.

"How was the train ride?" he asked, bumping my shoulder as he came to stand next to me. "You didn't get into any trouble, did you?"

I lightly shoved him away from me, putting some space between us.

"It was fine, no, I didn't get in any trouble," I mumbled back, readjusting my bag on my shoulder.

"Well you weren't texting me back so I had no idea if you even made it on the train," Micah replied, his tone slightly clipped yet still light.

He had this passive aggressive nature about him. He never blew up at me, but he had a way of making sure I was aware when I was testing his patience, which seemed to be all the time.

"My phone died," I told him in a bored tone as Micah led me toward the campus.

"Well, you should keep it charged," he said. "What if something happened? You would need some way to contact someone."

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, Dad."

"Maybe I'm acting like a Dad, but I'm right," Micah replied. At least he seemed to care about my well-being more than my actual Dad.

As Micah and I walked through campus, nearly everyone around us greeted him. We were only two weeks into school, yet Micah seemed to know the whole campus. It was like that for him in high school too. He was one of those people that no one had a bad thing to say about. Everyone knew him, everyone liked him.

Of course, that was until our hockey team became divided our senior year and half the guys on the team ended up hating him. Somehow the two of us started on opposite sides and ended up in the same place.

"So we got invited to a little get together tonight," Micah told me as he waved to another person. "Not a party, just a few of us. We don't have to go if you don't want to, but I think we should."

"I don't care, Micah."

"Also, my dad wants you to call him at some point," Micah said. "It doesn't have to be now, but sometime this weekend. He doesn't want to bother you, but he wants to hear from you."

"But you have no problem bothering me?" I asked.

Micah shrugged. "Not at all."

"I'll probably go home next weekend to try to see my sister," I said, rolling my eyes.

"My parents will be happy if you go home."

It was still strange talking about home as the Hanson's house. I had only lived at their house for a few months before going off to college, but it still felt more like home than the house I grew up in ever did.

I guessed that was part of why I felt the need to go back there. Not only did I want to go back to see my sister, but I wanted to go back into the Hanson's house and have that feeling of home again.

Micah looked over at me and must have noticed a difference in the way I was walking.

"Is something wrong with your leg?" he asked.

"Some asshole knocked me over on my run this morning," I told him. "It's fine."

"Maybe you should get it checked out," he said. "Before hockey season starts and it becomes a problem."

"Maybe."

Eventually we made it to Micah's room and I set my stuff down next to his bed. I had been here one other time when I went with Micah and his parents to move him in. He lived in a suite with other freshmen hockey players. The bedroom was small, but bigger than mine, and it was a shared room.

"My roommate is staying with his girlfriend this weekend," Micah told me, sitting down on his desk. "He said you could use his bed. He put on new sheets before he left."

I scowled at him. "I'm not sleeping in some dude's bed.

He rolled his eyes. "Okay, you can sleep in mine then. I'll take his."

"I'll take the floor."

"You're not sleeping on the floor," Micah denied, crossing his arms over his chest.

I let out a sigh but didn't respond. It wasn't worth arguing with Micah. He always seemed to win our arguments anyway, not that we argued about anything serious. He just didn't like to see me be stubborn or wallow in self pity.

"I think you'll like hanging out with my friends here," Micah said, obviously feeling like he had won our argument. "They're kinda low key. Not real big partiers. It's nice."

I had enough of parties in high school back when I was popular and so good at faking like I had my life together when I was really doing everything I

could to hide who I really was. Back then, parties were where I could let loose and receive all the validation I never got from my parents. They were where I could be with girls and try to convince myself that was what I wanted.

Now a party seemed like the last place I wanted to be. I was beyond seeking validation and trying to convince myself I was straight. Now I just wanted to be left alone and perceived by no one.

"I can just stay here and you can go hang out with your friends," I told Micah, sitting down on his bed.

Micah shot me a look that told me that wasn't going to happen. He would rather stay here with me than leave me all alone. He thought I didn't socialize enough and he made sure to tell me that. Just like I made sure to tell him he wasn't my therapist and he could keep his mouth shut.

"I'm not leaving you here alone," he said, shaking his head. "So let's not even start an argument."

I nodded, rolling my eyes as I leaned over on his bed to plug my phone into his charger.

"Have you made any friends at school?" he asked me, though he already knew the answer.

I wasn't the friend making type. In high school, I had been friends with all those kids since we first learned how to skate. I never needed to make friends because we had been around each other before it was so hard. Then I became captain of the hockey team in high school and I didn't have to make any new friends then either. I had the hockey team and that was it.

It wasn't like I was trying and failing to make friends in college. I just didn't talk to anyone. I barely even talked to my team because I didn't want them finding out more about me than I wanted them to know, though I was sure some of them already knew. At least the ones my age who I had played against the last few years.

Eventually, Micah won our silent argument and dragged me over to one of his friend's dorm rooms. At least Micah was an honest person, and the gathering we headed to was actually low key. There were only four other people there sitting in front of a TV and playing NHL on Xbox.

The one who opened the door was taller than both Micah and me. His expression brightened when he saw the two of us and moved aside to let us in.

"Micah!" he exclaimed, his arms opened wide. "And you must be Landon. I'm Dylan, one of Micah's teammates."

I nodded at him in a greeting and followed Micah into the cramped room. This dorm was in a suite, with a common area in the middle surrounded by the bedrooms. There was a couch and a couple chairs with some bean bag chairs scattered on the floor.

Micah's friends made room for the two of us on the couch and I sat on the end closest to the window while Micah sat in the middle.

"Either of you want to play?" the guy on the other side of Micah asked. I shook my head and Micah politely declined.

I just watched the game on the TV and listened as Micah made small talk with his friends. I tried not to think about how I didn't fit in with these crowds anymore or how I preferred my solitude over being surrounded by people.

I wasn't paying too much attention to the conversations in the room until one of the guys lying down on his stomach on a bean bag chair let out a loud groan at something that happened on the screen and said something along the lines of "that's so gay" which earned a reaction of Micah.

"Jeremy," Micah said.

"Sorry," Jeremy replied, turning to face Micah. "Forgot I have to take that out of my vocabulary."

Micah glanced over at me and it took everything in me not to kick him in the shin. I wasn't necessarily hiding the fact that I was gay anymore, but I didn't want to announce it to everyone, especially a room full of hockey players at a catholic school.

Ever since things went sour with he and Elijah, Micah's had this gray cloud of guilt hanging over him. So when he got to college, the first thing he did was get involved with the diversity and inclusion board at the school, and he was now an ambassador for the hockey team. It came to no surprise that he would bring that over to his friendships as well.

"We all have to," Dylan said. "You never know who on the team could be struggling. You have to watch your mouth."

"I know, I know," Jeremy replied. "We already got this lecture."

"Yeah, I'm just saying you shouldn't say those things in private either," Dylan responded before turning to Micah and me. "You two had a gay guy on your team right?"

More than one, so apparently Dylan didn't know about me.

Micah nodded. "Elijah. He transferred senior year and we played against him and his boyfriend, Fox. They're playing at BU and Northeastern this year."

Micah would never tell these guys, but the reason Elijah transferred out was because he had to. After he came out to Micah, Micah couldn't hold it in. He told me, worried about what Elijah's confession meant for him and the team and I lost it. I had pent up rage over my own sexuality and hearing about Elijah's made me snap. Then he told his mother before she heard from anyone else and she kicked him out.

So, he didn't just transfer. He was forced out and I was a huge part to blame. Just another thing to add to the list of things wrong with me.

"It's cool though, having two out players in the NCAA," one of the other guys said. "It'll hopefully make hockey culture less toxic."

Micah hummed in agreement, scrolling through his phone.

"Oh, speaking of," Micah said, tilting his phone toward me. "There they are."

He was on Instagram, a picture of Elijah and Fox displayed on the screen. There were a few things I noticed then.

One was that I couldn't look at Elijah without feeling a squeezing in my stomach because I felt so guilty over the way I had treated him and how he helped me when I needed it despite that. Another thing was that I couldn't look at the two of them together without a painful throb in my heart because I envious of what they had, and how they could be out in the open together.

The last thing made me clench my fists and my jaw. I saw Fox and instantly placed the familiar stranger who knocked me on my ass. Fox's brother. The one who held me back from punching Fox one day in the school parking lot. The two looked too much alike for me not to notice.

And now all I could do was hope I'd never run into him again.

***

Wren Ridley

Every time Stella convinced me to go out, I always told myself it would be the last time. But I had always been a bit of a liar.

Having to make the drive home on Saturday morning instead of Friday night was only part of the reason I was mad at myself for going out last night. I could have slept in a little later, spent some time with Fawn and Colt, but instead I was watching everyone around me get shit-faced and then fucking the first guy who showed interest. That might have been what every other college student wanted, but not me.

The idea of all that bored me, but somehow I always ended up giving in. It made me wonder if I did that because I was stuck searching for something within myself, trying to find a piece of me that had yet to be uncovered. Or

I just always feared I'd be missing out if I didn't go, even knowing I wasn't missing out on anything that didn't happen every weekend in the bars in college towns.

Thankfully, the ride back home from Providence was roughly half an hour, maybe a little bit longer, and that was something my mother reminded me of whenever she sent me a text message or called me.

"You know, it's only half an hour. You can come home for the night and still make it to class tomorrow," she'd say.

When my sister, Raven, moved out over the summer, my parents had all but begged me to start living at home and commuting to school for the upcoming year, despite knowing that I had already signed a housing contract and there was no getting out of it for the year. My parents had six kids because they wanted a big family, and they hadn't readied themselves for when we would start moving out.

So now I was on my way home on a Saturday morning because I could always hear the sound of my mother's sad voice in the back of my head about how much she missed her kids. And I was hoping that visiting more often would make her voice fade from my mind.

Mom was waiting for me by the door when I arrived home. She had a big smile on her face and held her arms open wide for me to step into.

"I'm so happy you're home!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms around me. "Colt has been on a mean streak lately. I need you to talk some sense into him before I make him sleep outside."

I chuckled, returning here hug and looking behind her small frame to see if Colt had been lingering nearby.

"What's his problem?" I asked, releasing her and shutting the door behind me.

"He gets like this when you leave for school," she told me. "Because he likes when you take him out. I think it's worse now that Fox and Raven are

gone too. And Fawn's always hanging out with Ava and her friends. I think he's feeling lonely."

I thought that Colt just liked being a little asshole sometimes, but I wouldn't say that to my mother.

"Where is he?" I asked, noting the silence in the house.

"He's in the back with Dad," she replied. "Dad's been trying to make him play outside more and get off that *Switch* thing he's always playing with. He's not happy about it."

"And Fawn?"

"Ava's," she said. "Dan and Mindy are going through the same thing as us. They love having the girls there."

Just after the words left her mouth, the back door opened followed by loud footsteps bounding through the house. Colt stomped inside and up the stairs, barely sparing me a glance. Dad walked in with a look of exasperation, his eyes wide as he threw his hands up then let them fall to his sides.

"That kid is a menace," Dad said with a huff. He wiped his hand over his forehead and it was then that I noticed the red mark on his face.

"What happened to you?" I asked, pointing my finger at him.

"We were playing wiffle ball. Colt hits hard," Dad said, placing his hand on the mark then wincing. "It's like he took all his aggression out on that poor ball. It cracked!"

I stifled laughter as Mom walked over to him to get a closer look at his face. I took the opportunity to go toward the stairs and to Colt's room.

Colt was the baby of the family and he hated being treated like it. I could only imagine how much worse it had gotten since the rest of us moved out. The kid was in seventh grade now. He was at that age where he thought he

was more mature than he actually was and didn't want to be doted on by our parents.

He had always looked up to the rest of his siblings, but the two of us had some sort of connection that he didn't have with the others. We were a lot alike, but not in the way Fox and I were which made the two of us clash. Colt and I were alike in a way that made us have a mutual understanding of the other.

I knocked on his door before entering, knowing he wouldn't hear my knock anyway. He was sitting on his bed, headphones on over his ears when I walked in, playing a game on the laptop I had gifted him after I bought a new one.

I sat down on the bed next to him and yanked his headphones off.

Colt whined. "Stop."

"You stop being a punk," I shot back.

"Tell them to stop treating me like I'm a little kid and I'll consider it," he said and I winced. He sounded more like me every time we spoke.

"You are a little kid to them," I told him. "You're just going to have to deal with it."

I contemplated on whether I really wanted to say my next words. I had been thinking about *not* manipulating or bribing my siblings after it became such a big issue between Fox and me, but I felt as thought this situation called for a little bribery while it still worked on Colt.

"I'll take you out right now and buy you whatever new game you want, but you have to start acting better," I offered. He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye then closed the computer and turned to face me fully.

"What if I don't want a new game?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

I let out a heavy sigh.

"Okay, then what do you want?"

"I want a new phone. I'm sick of getting everyone's hand me downs," he replied.

I sighed again. This was my own fault, really. The kid had learned my ways of always getting something out of whatever agreements or decisions I made. He was only using my own ways against me.

"I can't just get you a new phone," I argued. "I have to talk to Mom and Dad about that."

"So talk to them."

I stood up from the bed and made my way to the door.

"The phone is way more than I offered, so you're going to owe me," I told him with raised eyebrows.

All he did was shrug at me with a wicked smile.

I shook my head and went back downstairs.

**

Thanks for reading! Please let me know what you thought of the chapter.

How do you feel about Landon and Wren now that you're in their POVs?

03

Landon Reilly

I needed to change my running route or else I was going to end up on my ass every day.

Wren looked down at me with a smug expression, his mouth quirking up ever so slightly in amusement. I glared up at him and pushed myself up from the ground.

"You're doing this on purpose now?" I spat.

"Perhaps," he said. Who fucking says that?

"I know who you are, you know," I told him.

"I don't think we've met," he replied, feigning ignorance. I could practically feel my eye twitching in annoyance. This guy was infuriating.

"Cut the shit," I snapped, pointing a finger at him. "I know you know who I am. And I know who you are now."

"I figured you would," he replied with a shrug, showing off his nonchalance. "How long did it take for you to figure it out?"

Longer than I would ever admit to him. He looked enough like Fox that I should have known instantly.

Wren smirked when I didn't say anything. "You don't have to tell me. Your non-answer is an answer in itself."

"What the hell are you even talking about?"

"You not answering is telling me that you're too embarrassed to tell me how long it took you," Wren said, the smirk staying on his face. "And now I

know that for sure, since I'm having to spell this out for you."

I wanted to run at him and punch him in the face, my anger coming at me in waves. That was what the Landon of a few months ago would have done, but not this one. Not the one that was a shell of who he once was, or the one who knew his old anger was always misplaced.

That didn't stop me from clenching my fists at my sides, my fingernails digging into my skin. Wren seemed determined to push my buttons and showing him that it was working was only going to make him do it even more.

"You knew who I was the whole time." I said it as a statement because I knew it was true. He wouldn't have been so smug if it wasn't.

"The whole time?" he asked. "I didn't think about you at all since we first saw each other. But, yes, I knew when I saw you. I thought that much was obvious."

He continued, "Is that what you were doing? Thinking about me all weekend, trying to place where you knew me from? I'm flattered, Lance."

I grimaced. "Lance?"

"That's what you're hung up on? And not the thinking about me all weekend thing? So it must be true."

I rolled my eyes, crossing my arms over my chest. " *No,* it's not. You look a lot like Fox."

"Right. And you've punched his face a few times so it's a hard face to forget," Wren replied, the smirk dropping, though he still looked entirely at ease like this conversation bored him.

I didn't want him to see the remorse I felt. I already felt dumber than him with the way he spoke and the way he looked at me, I didn't want him to see how truly weak and broken I was. God knows what he would do with that.

"I can't talk anymore, Lance, I have things to do," Wren said after stunning me into silence. "I think you should maybe stop getting in my way so you stop ending up on your ass and we don't have to have these conversations anymore."

He jogged away before I could formulate a response and I took off running the other way to blow off some steam.

He had simultaneously infuriated me and made me feel like shit. If I kept running into him, I would be faced with that again and again, thinking about the harm I had caused and the damage I had done. I was still so far from even being able to confront all that without feeling like throwing up.

That was why I wished I could have gone to school somewhere further away, where there was absolutely no chance of seeing anyone I knew. But after what had happened at The Masters Tournament, where I started a bench-clearing brawl and ruined my team's season, barely any schools wanted me. Providence College only offered me a spot because Micah's dad had pull there and he put in a word for me. It was my only option and it was too close to home for me. I'd have to play against guys from my old team, and against Fox and Elijah, all of which probably had it out for me.

I would have to face them all once the season started in a little over a month. And Wren was just a giant wake up call that it was coming.

I jogged back around to where I was going before bumping into Wren and entered a coffee shop near by. As I was waiting in line, the bell on the door sounded, and when I turned to look, there stood Wren.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Are you following me?"

"Are *you* following *me* ?" he asked. "I come here every day and I've never seen you here." He walked up to stand behind me in line.

I pressed my lips together in a line, holding back from snapping at him.

"Trust me, Lance, if I wanted to follow you, I'd be way more discrete about it," Wren added, motioning for me to move up in the line.

"Can you stop calling me that?" I snapped as I turned to face away from him.

"I would if it didn't get you so riled up."

His face was set into a wicked, teasing smile when I turned back to glare at him. It was a smile that looked like it was used to lure you in and turn on you when you least expected it. It was evil and conniving, horrible but alluring. His face was one you would see in a dream turned nightmare, something you thought was friendly and turned out it was not.

"Better turn around," Wren said in quiet, smooth voice. "It's your turn, Lance."

I immediately turned around and walked up to the counter with the waiting cashier. I ordered my drink and heard a snort from Wren as I did. All I could do was ignore him. He only acted like that because he wanted a reaction out of me, and he was starting to see how easy it was to get one. People like him thrived off of that. You let them see even the smallest piece of you and they'll take advantage of it.

After I paid for my drink, I moved off to the side while I waited for it. While I had been in this coffee place before, it wasn't a frequent spot for me. Now that I knew Wren was a regular here, it definitely wouldn't become one.

"You know, if you're going to infiltrate my coffee place, you could at least order something good off their menu," Wren said after placing his order and coming to stand with me. "They have a lot of good drinks and you ordered a hot coffee with oat milk and no sugar, like, what the fuck?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't even look at him as he stood next to me. All those specialty coffees and drinks confused me, not that I'd ever admit that to him. And I wasn't really used to coffee ordering anyway. When I lived with my parents, my dad only ever let me have black coffee. I only started getting oat milk because that was how Micah ordered his so I tried it one day. That was the extent of my coffee drinking. For my dad, coffee in the

morning was a means for energy, to wake me up in the early morning. It wasn't to be enjoyed or had at any other time of day.

"Coffee for Landon?" the barista called out, placing my coffee on the counter. I quickly grabbed it and left the small coffee shop, hoping to leave Wren far behind me.

"It's funny seeing you squirm," Wren said from behind me, startling me and causing the coffee in my cup to splash out and burn my hand.

"What the fuck?" I asked, shaking the burning liquid off my hand. "How did you get here so fast? Where the hell did you come from?"

I remembered another time he seemed to appear out of thin air. It was last year when I had gone to Elijah's school in an angry rampage and had been ready to start throwing punches at Fox, Wren's brother, when Wren appeared out of nowhere and hold me back. He had held onto me tightly, seemingly ready to stay there and restrain me all day if it meant I wouldn't lay a hand on his brother.

"I walked, one foot in front of the other," Wren replied, pulling me from my memory, He took a sip of his drink. It was iced and looked more like a coffee milk than actual coffee.

"So you followed me."

"You're letting yourself think I followed you," he said, taking another long sip as we walked. "Reality is, we're just going the same way."

Wren had this way about him that was hard to describe. It was in the way he carried himself and in the way he spoke. His walk was more like a glide, his head was held high with his lips always curled upward like he was constantly smirking, and his voice was silky smooth, melodic, and low. He spoke like he knew more about what was going on in your head than even you did. It was like he lived in a different world than everyone else, like he simultaneously lived in the present and the future, knowing things that nobody else knew.

Our paths diverted eventually, but neither of us said any parting words.

When I arrived back at my dorm, my phone buzzed. I sighed, thinking it was going to be Micah, but I let a small smile perch itself on my face when I saw the text.

From: Unknown
landon it's livi. going to call you from this number.

It was only a few seconds later that my phone rang with the unknown number.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Hey," my sister, Olivia, replied. "Do you have time to talk right now? I sort of only have right now because I'm borrowing a phone and I'm hiding in the bathroom at school."

"Yeah, I can talk now," I said, placing my coffee down on my desk and sitting on the bed. "What's up?"

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to call lately," she started. "Mom and Dad have been really on me about my phone. They don't want me on it too much. I don't think they know I've been calling you though."

"It's fine, Liv," I assured her. "I get it."

"It's so unfair," she said in almost a whisper.

"They haven't been too horrible to you, have they?"

That was my one fear about leaving home last year, that they would take out their frustrations about me on Olivia. When I moved in with the Hanson's, I hadn't heard from Olivia for months. I later found out that it was not because she was angry at me, but because our parents were monitoring her phone to make sure she wasn't contacting me. She eventually started texting me through a texting app on an old iPod rather than on her phone, and she would call me using her friend's phones whenever she had the chance. We

would only see each other when she could get away from our parents long enough to meet.

"No, they've been normal," Olivia answered. "Just thinking I'm going to be corrupted if I'm on my phone too much. Goes to show how well they actually know me."

I chuckled. "Clearly not very well."

"I'm going to have to go back to class soon," she said. "I just wanted to ask if you were coming home this weekend?"

A puzzled expression formed on my face. "What's this weekend?"

"You said one weekend a month until hockey season started," Olivia explained. "It's been a month since I've seen you and hockey season is starting soon."

My face dropped at that. I didn't know Olivia kept track of how long it had been since we last saw each other. And I felt like a horrible brother for not even realizing that on my own. I missed my sister all the time, but I never thought about her missing me.

"Then, yes, I'll come home this weekend," I replied. I had no idea how, but I'd walk there if I had to.

"Yay!" she whispered in excitement. "Got to go. I'll text you."

"Bye Livi."

"Bye Landon."

With that, she hung up, and I was left staring at my phone screen for longer than I realized. When my eyes focused on the time, I shot up from the bed and rushed to change out of my running clothes. I was going to be late to class, and I stopped to think if I should just skip it all together. I didn't want to be noticed by anyone walking in late, only because I didn't want people looking at me at all. But I had also told myself I was going to be a good student this year.

It felt like I didn't have much of a choice. I changed into new clothes, grabbing my backpack and my coffee, before hauling myself out of the room and across campus to my morning class.

The lecture hall was packed when I walked in, and the only seats left were in the front. Luckily, the professor hadn't started lecturing yet and the students in the room were too busy talking to each other to notice me slip into the room and into the front row.

As I sat down, the girl next to me leaned over and tapped my shoulder.

"Do you have the notes from last class?" she asked.

I nodded, opening my notebook and sliding it over to her so she could take pictures of it. She smiled at me when she was done, sliding the notebook back to me.

"I'm Jess, by the way," she introduced herself. "You're Landon, right? On the hockey team?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"I'm friends with some of the other guys on the team," she said, leaning closer to me as she spoke. "You should come hang out some time."

While her words were friendly, her eyes were anything but. She was flirting with me, giving me the stare to show she was interested and hoping I would take the hints she was dropping.

But that was another promise I made to myself this year; I wasn't going to use girls to try to trick myself into being straight. I was done denying my sexuality, done being with women when I wasn't attracted to them and didn't enjoy it. That didn't mean I would let myself start being with men, but I was officially done trying with women because I knew it was no use.

Thankfully, I didn't have to reply because the professor started class right after that.

And as I took notes, Jess kept her eyes on me the whole class.

**

Thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter!

04

Wren Ridley

Probably one of the dumbest things about college students was that they decided the weekend started on Thursday. It was somehow the start of the weekend even though we all had a whole other day of the week to get through. And my friends were some of the dumb ones, insisting that "Thirsty Thursday" was a real thing and that they were fine with going to class on Friday hungover. Or just not going at all.

No matter how dumb I found it, I still somehow ended up out at the bar on Thursday night. It was a favorite for all the college students in Providence because they didn't card.

James and Stella were already a couple drinks deep, but neither were drunk yet. It was only a matter of time before James started behaving badly and I would be the one stuck babysitting him. Stella always held her liquor better than he did.

"Wren," Stella called out, walking back over to our table with two drinks in her hand, some cocktail for herself and a water for me. "You keeping an eye on James?" She sat down beside me, placing the drinks on the table. I nodded and sipped the water.

"He's in the corner over there making out with some girl," I told her, nodding my head in the direction of James. "He's not even that drunk yet."

"He's just warming up, I'm sure," she said, taking a long sip of her drink then looking over at me with a wide grin. "He'll have his real fun tomorrow night."

I shrugged. "Maybe."

"You're not coming out tomorrow?"

I shook my head, resting my elbows on the table in front of me. "No, I have to go home."

I had already told my mother and Colt I would go home this weekend, and I wanted to make sure he was being less of a little shit for them anyway since I got him his phone. That kid has been FaceTiming me nonstop since getting it. Mom also told me that Fox was going to be home this weekend, since hockey was starting up full time soon and he wouldn't have time to visit for a while, probably not until Thanksgiving in a couple months.

Stella groaned. "You *just* went home last weekend."

"My brother's visiting," I explained, though I didn't really have to explain anything to her.

It wasn't like Stella and I were best friends. She might have thought we were, but that wasn't how I saw us. Stella and James were my school friends. I hadn't seen or heard from either of them much over the summer anyway. Stella was from South Dakota while James was much closer, being from New York, but still not close enough to casually hang out with over the summer.

"I can't imagine going to school so close to home," she said, taking another sip from her drink. "Not that I had many options anyway."

I couldn't relate. I had always wanted to go to Brown, no other options ever came to mind. This was always the end goal, so I spent my whole life knowing this was where I wanted to be. I didn't know if it was a blessing or a curse to be so close to home, going to school in a place I was already so familiar with, a place I had grown up around. A lot of people wanted to leave their hometown for school, explore what further away places had to offer. That just wasn't something I wanted.

I just hummed in acknowledgement at Stella's words and took another sip of water before returning to my people watching. I recognized some of the faces from Brown and around Providence. Some were even some of my other acquaintances that I knew through James and Stella. Others I had a harder time placing due to the dim lights with the red hue in the bar. It

masked some people's faces better than others. But eventually my eyes settled on a face that I recognized immediately, one that I had been seeing too much of lately.

Landon was on the other side of the bar, and I could tell that he was shit-faced. A light sheen of sweat covered his face, causing his messy hair to stick to his forehead in some places. The hair that was usually pushed back, settled as bangs with small curls at the ends over his forehead. His eyes were glossy and looked as if they couldn't focus on anything. The biggest indicator of his intoxication though was the wide smile on his face. I didn't think I had ever seen that kid smile during the limited interactions we had.

It wasn't a real smile though. It was one of those drunk smiles that seemed to be too big for his face.

He was surrounded by some guys that I could only assume were from the hockey team at Providence College. Some girls stood between them. All of them were drunk and I watched as they all took a shot together.

"You going to hook up with him?" Stella asked, dragging my attention over to her. She smirked, nodding her head toward Landon.

I scoffed, leaning back in my seat and crossing my arms over my chest. "No, I just know him from back home."

"He's hot," she replied. I followed her gaze back over to him and from that moment, I couldn't take my eyes off of him.

Some song I never heard of started playing and Landon and his friends dispersed to the open area of the bar to start dancing. A couple of the girls danced closely to him, but he didn't touch either of them. It was like he was in his own world, his hips swaying to the music sensually. He rolled and moved his shoulders in a way that made his chest move to the music.

Landon danced like this was something he did every weekend. He lifted his arms, causing his t-shirt to ride up and expose his lower stomach and show off the hair that started there and went lower beneath the waist band of his

jeans, then brought a hand back down and let it slide from his chest down to his stomach.

"Oh my God," Stella said, fanning herself dramatically. "He so hot he's hurting *my* feelings," she added, referencing the lyrics to the song that was playing.

He turned around, his back facing us now, and I couldn't help but let my eyes travel down his body. They started at his back and the way his muscles strained under his shirt, then they went lower to where his fitted jeans hugged his hips and ass so nicely, I had to quickly avert my gaze.

I hadn't noticed my mouth was slightly agape as I watched him, so I shut it before Stella noticed.

This wasn't something I did. I didn't watch strangers in bars and notice the way they danced or the small slivers of skin that became exposed as they did. That was mostly because I never thought of anyone as hot enough to watch. I hooked up with people who were good looking enough or at least as good looking as I was. It was arrogant, I would admit that.

But I had been watching Landon because he was hot. Hotter than me. With his messed up hair, the way he moved, and how his full, pink lips were mouthing along to the words, he was *hot* . Sexy even. And that was how I knew something was seriously wrong with me.

"You totally find him hot!" Stella exclaimed excitedly. "You never think anyone is hot!"

"That's just not true," I lied. "I'm thinking about how much he looks like an idiot." The tightness in my pants would disagree. I stood up, quickly throwing back the rest of my water before telling Stella I was going to the bathroom and scurrying across the room as quickly as I could.

I stood in front of the mirror and looked at my flushed face, glaring at my reflection. I had gotten myself all riled up watching *Landon* of all people. That might have been the most fucked up thing I had ever done.

My refuge in the bathroom didn't last long because a moment later, the door swung open and hit the wall, Landon walking inside. I turned my glare to him as he strode in, ignoring me as he went and used the urinal. He didn't make eye contact with me until he was washing his hands and glanced at me through the mirror.

"Oh, it's you," he said, his voice smoother and higher than normal, less clipped and snapping like it usually was when he spoke to me. "You followin' me?" he slurred. He wiped his wet hands on the front of his jeans and turned to face me.

"Yes, Lance, I'm following you," I sarcastically replied. "As if this isn't the most popular college hangout spot in the city."

"Oh," he said. He was looking at me, but it felt like he wasn't actually seeing me. "I don't think I wanna be here anymore."

"Take that up with your friends."

"They're not," Landon replied, pausing. "They're not my friends."

I shrugged at him and left the room. The table I had been at before was now taken by people I didn't know. James was at the bar and Stella was off dancing with some girl. I sighed and stood against the wall with my arms crossed over my chest like I was their fucking bodyguard or something. It wasn't until later when James was completely trashed that Stella and I decided to drag him out of there.

Just as we were leaving, I saw a figure face down on the bar. I knew it was Landon without even seeing his face. I was prepared to keep walking, but Stella stopped me.

"Don't you know him?" she asked, pointing at Landon.

I sighed. "Yeah, let's go."

"You should help him," she said as she held onto James. "I think his friends left him."

"That's not my problem."

"If we leave him here, they're going to call the cops and he'll get busted."

"Again, not my problem."

"Wren," Stella groaned. "Just go pick him up. I'll take James off your hands for the night."

I would like to say that I wasn't a nice person and that I wasn't easily persuaded by Stella, but I walked over to the bar and dragged Landon off the chair. He was barely coherent as I pulled him along with me outside and stuffed him into the backseat of my car with James. Both of them were awake, but neither knew what was going on.

Stella dragged James up into the dorm once we arrived while I took Landon. He was tripping over his own feet as I pulled him along next to me. Stella's room was just across the hall from mine and James's, so we walked up together, and she took him inside her room.

Landon groaned as I set him down on the bed, holding onto his head with both hands.

"My brain is swimming," he slurred, his eyes squeezed shut. I made him turn onto his side and he opened his eyes, his wide gaze on me. "I have to go— I have to go see Livi."

"You have to go to sleep so shut up and close your eyes," I replied, sitting in my desk chair, thinking I could get some writing done.

I had been working on my novel for a few months now. It had gotten so bad at one point I deleted my whole draft and started over. I always felt I wrote better at night, and now was as good a time as any so I could get something done and stay awake for a while to make sure Landon didn't drown in his own vomit.

"My sister," he continued. "I can't stay. I have to go. Take the bus."

I let out a long sigh. "Go to sleep."

Landon's eyes fought to stay open, but ultimately, they fluttered shut and he fell asleep. His breathing evened out, and I started writing.

At some point in the night, I rested my head against the desk and fell asleep, and when I woke up my neck and back were aching. Landon had turned onto his stomach, lying face down into my pillow. I had to remind myself to wash that pillowcase immediately. Or just wash all my sheets to get *him* of off them.

I shook him awake and pulled the pillow out from under his head. His eyes shot open, and he sat up on the bed, holding his head with one hand and looking around the room in confusion.

"What the fuck..." he muttered.

His hair sat messily on top of his head, reminding me of how it looked last night, and that made me want to get him out of my room as soon as possible. And I would do that the only way I knew how: by making him so mad that he would storm out of here and leave on his own.

"You seem like a fun drunk," I said, earning a glare from him. "Seriously, I didn't think you could ever be anything other than angry, but you seemed like a fun time."

"Why am I here?" he snapped.

"Your friends left you."

"Those weren't my friends."

"Either way, they left you," I replied. "And you can say thank you at any time."

"And why did you take me here?" he asked, his patience wearing thin.

"I didn't have sex with you last night, if that's what you're worried about," I told him. His nostrils flared angrily. "But I might have if you were sober and willing. We could do it now if you want."

Landon scoffed and stood up from the bed, pushing past me to go toward the door.

"Don't say shit like that to me," he spat, patting his pockets. He pulled out his phone and checked the time, swearing under his breath.

"The offer stands," I said, sitting down on the desk. "You were saying something about your sister last night. Going home today?"

"That's none of your business."

"You know the closest bus stop to home from here is still, like, twenty minutes away from home," I told him, grinning at his irritation as he ran his fingers through his hair.

He shook his head, opening the door to leave the room.

"Like I said, the offer still stands," I called out to him. "You seemed pretty interested in me last night," I lied with a wicked grin.

Landon didn't even look back at me as he slammed the door shut behind him.

"You're a good dancer by the way!" I called out chuckling as I heard the door to the suite slam shut.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading.

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter! Were you surprised Wren took Landon back to his dorm? Do you think this will change their relationship?

05

Landon Reilly

My head throbbed with every step I took. I had no idea where I was and my phone was dying. Eventually, I made it near that coffee shop I had gone to a few days ago and I could finally make my way back to my dorm.

There was no use going to class considering it had already started and I was still hungover and about fifteen minutes from my dorm room.

When I finally made it back onto campus, class had just let out and the walkways were crowded with students walking slow as shit to their next destinations. I wanted to plow over them, knock them off of the path and keep moving. But that was just the angry me trying to take over, the one with the misplaced anger.

It was no one's fault but mine that I decided to go out last night or that I ended up getting drunk and somehow sleeping in Wren's bed for the night. I could admit that the fact I had stayed the night with Wren was contributing to my agitation.

My teammates had intercepted me at the dining hall last night when I was getting dinner and dragged me out to the bar with them. What happened after, I couldn't really explain. It started with shots and ended with shots. I figured if I was being forced into a social situation, I should at least take the edge off.

It was a bad idea. I hadn't gotten drunk since I drank almost an entire bottle of tequila and walked myself over to Micah's house and cried. Crying and the brief memory of Micah and Elijah dropping me into bed were the only things I remembered from that night.

The only thing I remembered from the night before was getting to the bar and having the first couple shots. The rest was gone.

I wasn't looking where I was going, causing me to almost bump into someone. I stopped before we collided, ready to shout some rude remark, before I realize the person was Jess. She stared up at me with a playful expression, twirling a piece of her braided hair with her finger.

"Hey, Landon," she said with a wide smile. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Like shit," I grumbled.

She looked to be perfectly fine and I knew she was with us at the bar last night. She was one of the ones that left me there. I couldn't even let myself be truly angry at her or the rest of them. They had no obligation to me. They weren't my friends, and that just reminded myself of how truly alone I was.

"I figured," she chuckled. "You were still going by the time I left. You're quite the party animal I guess."

She looked down at my clothes with a puzzled expression, then glanced back to my face.

"You're wearing what you wore last night," she pointed out.

"I haven't exactly had time to change," I said in a clipped tone.

"Did you go home with someone?" Jess asked, that playful glint back in her eyes.

Not in the way she was thinking.

"No," I snapped. I was not in the mood to be talking to her.

Jess's expression turned to one of confusion as I pushed past her and continued toward my dorm.

Back in high school, I would have jumped at the opportunity to entertain someone like Jess. She was pretty and outgoing and seemingly not looking for anything serious. That was what I would go for when I was trying to

force myself to like girls. Nothing serious, purely physical. But I didn't have the energy anymore and I wanted to be left alone.

I stomped all the way back to my dorm and let out a sigh of relief when I walked inside to the room being empty. My roommate was almost never here, and that was a blessing.

I immediately took a shower and brushed my teeth, then changed into new clothes. I had two other classes for the day, and since I was trying to be a good student, I really didn't want to miss them. Even though my head was pounding, and my throat was dry and all I wanted to do was sleep, I grabbed my backpack and dragged myself to my last two classes.

One of my hockey teammates was in my last class, and he insisted on sitting beside me with the rest of the people he associated himself in the class. He didn't shut up for the entire time. I had debated on switching out during the add/drop period, but I hated change and didn't want to mess up my schedule or track for my classes.

"You coming out with us again tonight, Reilly?" my teammate, Cooper, asked, using my last name. I wasn't even sure if Cooper was his first name or his last, but that was what everyone called him.

"Nah," I said, shaking my head.

"Are you still hung over too?" he asked, annoyingly tapping his pen on the table. "I think I woke up still drunk."

"Yeah, I guess." I was short with all of my teammates. None of them seemed to care. Most of them would talk to a brick wall.

"Gotta enjoy it while it lasts," Cooper said, leaning back in his seat. "Only a few more weeks before training camp starts and we won't have the time."

I couldn't wait for that, to be able to finally play hockey again. On the ice, I didn't have to put up a front for anyone. I could just play my game, do what I was good at without being bothered. That was what I hoped for anyway.

Cooper had started talking to one of the other guys near him after that, and when class was over, I scurried out of the room before he could speak to me again. I went back to my dorm and started packing for the weekend.

My roommate, Kyle, came back at some point, but we didn't speak to each other. I was sort of lucky with that when I chose to have a random room assignment. Kyle was clean, quiet, and barely here. And he didn't bring anyone around, which was a plus.

It wasn't until later on that I started walking, and then running, to the bus station. I had somehow miscalculated how long it was going to take me to get there on foot, and I was desperate to get there because it was the only bus to the stop I wanted to go to for the rest of the night.

There were no stops directly to my hometown, but there was one a couple towns over that was close enough for me to get an Uber home. That wouldn't even matter if I missed this fucking bus.

Which I did, by about five minutes.

I kicked one of the near by benches out of frustration and paid no mind to how that hurt my foot. The pain didn't matter that much to me anyway. What mattered was getting home to see Olivia, and now I either had to wait until tomorrow afternoon for the next bus, or find some other way home.

I had just sat down on the bench and put my head in my hands when a car pulled up and beeped at me. I jumped back and narrowed my eyes to see Wren in the driver's seat, putting the window down.

"You put on quite a show just now," he said with that same easy expression he always wore. Seeing him just made me even more angry.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I snapped. How many times was this guy just going to randomly show up in my life?

"I was driving when I saw you running for your life down the sidewalk," Wren answered and I scowled at him to hide my embarrassment. "And then

I got to witness your little fit, so something's telling me you missed your bus."

I didn't answer him and he made no move to drive away.

"Well, are you going to get in or what?" Wren asked, impatiently tapping on the steering wheel.

"No," I replied. "Why would I willingly get in a car with you?"

"Because you need a ride home to see your sister," he said. My eyes widened slightly at his words. I was really beginning to think he was a mind reader.

"How do you even know that!" I exclaimed, standing up from the bench. "Are you some kind of fucking weirdo keeping tabs on me?"

Wren rolled his eyes. "You said it last night while you were drunk out of your mind."

Right, he had said something like that this morning.

Just another reason to never go out and get drunk ever again.

"So, you can either get a ride with me, since I'm heading that way anyway," Wren started. "Or you can sit around and wait for the next bus which is... never?"

I contemplated for a moment. No part of me wanted to get in the car with Wren. Not only was he a weirdo, but I didn't trust him, and I didn't want to be in a position where I owed him something. Something told me that he wasn't one to just give out favors and expect nothing in return.

"Lance, you have about two seconds before I'm gone," Wren called out, pulling me from my thoughts.

I huffed and grabbed my bags before walking over to the car. I pulled open the passenger door and got in. Wren didn't waste any time pulling away

from the curb once the door was shut, causing me to bang my head on the window.

Wren didn't seem to notice the scowl I threw his way as I shoved my bag into the backseat and put my seatbelt on. He picked up his phone without looking away from the road and un-paused his music.

Well, what I expected to be music. It turned out to be someone talking, reading something aloud.

"What the hell is this?" I asked after a few moments. The half an hour drive back home would feel like hours if I had to listen to this the whole time.

"It's an audiobook," Wren replied casually.

I knew he was some kind of creature rather than a person because who the fuck listens to audiobooks in the car.

"This is what you listen to?" I asked, disgust in my tone. "What even are you?"

Wren shrugged as he turned to merge onto the highway.

"I like to read," he said. "I can't read while I drive, so I listen. It's not a hard concept, but I understand if someone with your ineptitude has trouble with it."

I ignored him, crossing my arms over my chest as he switched lanes.

The traffic we hit was going to make the half hour drive closer to forty-five minutes or an hour. Wren didn't seem to mind. He was content listening to his stupid book. I, on the other hand, wanted nothing more for this car ride to be over. My leg anxiously bounced up and down as we slowly inched forward in the traffic. Wren let out a laugh and I couldn't tell if he was laughing at me or something that happened in the book, but hearing it made me angry anyway.

"Are we really going to listen to this shit the whole way?" I snapped, causing Wren to direct his attention to me.

"It's either this or silence."

"I'd rather sit in silence."

That was a mistake to say because Wren took me seriously and paused his book. And now the two of us were going five miles an hour on the highway with no noise other than the beeping cars around us.

"This better?" he asked me. I could practically hear the smugness in his voice.

No matter how uncomfortable this was, I wasn't going to ask him to turn it back on.

"So, you'd rather complete silence?" Wren asked. "Okay." He started tapping on the steering wheel at about the same pace as my bouncing leg.

This suddenly felt like a mistake. Sitting here with Wren was practically torture, and I knew deep down, he wasn't doing this for free. There would be some sort of catch that I wasn't going to be prepared for.

Wren laughed again, and this time I knew it had to have been at me.

"What?" I hissed.

"It's just funny, that's all," Wren replied, laughing again.

"What is?" I didn't know if I even wanted the answer to that.

"You," he said. "I just thought you were this tough guy, but here you are shaking in my car. I guess that was just what you pretended to be."

"What the hell are you even talking about?"

"You acted all tough when you were trying to beat up my brother every chance you got," Wren responded, his voice as smooth and low as ever, but now it had an edge to it.

"If you're going to do something to me to get back at me for what I did to Fox then just do it," I spat, halting my leg. "Get it over with."

"Oh, I'm not going to do anything to you," Wren nonchalantly replied. "It seems like you punish yourself enough and that's good enough for me."

"Then why are you bringing it up?"

"Because if I need to rely on you punishing yourself for it, then you need to be reminded of it," Wren said, the traffic breaking a bit so he could pick up speed. "I had a tough time reading you before, but I think I've got you figured out now."

So that's what this was. He only offered me a ride to figure me out. Maybe that meant that was all he wanted, and he wouldn't be looking for me to do him any favors.

"How can you have me figured out when I don't even have myself figured out?" I hadn't meant to ask that out loud, but the thought had slipped out of my mouth like words did when I was intoxicated.

"That's how I know I'm right about you," Wren told me, taking one hand off the steering wheel to rest it on the center console. "You're incredibly insecure, unsure of yourself and your future. And that scares you."

I hated how right he was and that he could see right through me. Not only that, but he was nearly impossible to read. Or I just wasn't as perceptive as him.

"You use anger as an outlet for your emotions," Wren continued. "Because anger is secondary. It's all the other emotions you feel that make you angry. I don't really see you as an angry person necessarily, it's just that anger is easier to deal with than everything else."

I let out a huff. "Can you stop analyzing me? I liked it better when we weren't talking."

"So, you're going to deprive me of my book and my words?" he asked with faux astonishment.

"Just turn your fucking book back on then." And he did. And I wouldn't admit to him or myself that I was actually paying attention to the words and getting interested.

We eventually made it through all the traffic and once we were back in town, Wren paused his book so I could give him directions to the Hanson's house.

When he pulled up to the curb outside the house, I tried to immediately make my exit, but Wren grabbed my arm and held me in place, his touch paralyzing.

"Give me your phone," Wren said, nodding toward the device I held in my hand. I made no move to give it to him, so he rolled his eyes and yanked it out of my hand.

"What are you—"

"Here," he said, shoving the phone back into my hand. "Text me if you need a ride home Sunday. I don't answer phone calls."

"Not gonna happen," I muttered, pulling my bag up from the backseat.

"You can say thank you at any time."

With that, I flipped him off and got out of the car, slamming the door behind me,

**

Thanks for reading!!

What did you think of the chapter? Were you surprised Wren drove Landon home? Do you think Wren has any other motivations for driving him home? Do you think Landon is going to text him for a ride back to campus?

06

Landon Reilly

Anne and Matthew Hanson were the type of parents I wished I had growing up. It was clear they loved their son and did what they thought was best for him. But they were also the type to own up to their mistakes. If they had wronged their son, they would apologize to him and make things right. They were a loving and affectionate couple, not afraid to show their love to each other or to their son.

My parents were never like that, so it took some getting used to when I moved in with the Hanson's. That was why when I walked into the house after Wren had dropped me off, the hug I got from Anne was shocking, but welcomed.

"Landon! I didn't know you were coming home this weekend!" Anne said, squeezing her arms around my waist. "What a pleasant surprise!"

"Sorry I didn't call, it was sort of a last minute decision."

Anne pulled away from me and waved me off.

"You don't have to call first, this is your home."

Home. I didn't know if that was something I would ever get used to. A place like this felt more like a home than mine ever did, but it still didn't feel like mine. I wasn't sure I would ever find a place that truly felt like mine.

"Landon?" Matthew asked, walking toward us with a smile. The expression on his face instantly made me feel guilty for never calling him like Micah asked me to.

"Hi, uh, I meant to call you," I started, awkwardly averting my gaze. "But I've been... busy."

He waved me off. "Don't worry about it. I know what college life is like."

I was sure he was imagining my college life a lot different than it actually was. But this was better than me admitting I just didn't want to call him because I had no idea what I would say. I was too used to my father only wanting to talk to me to make sure I was compliant with all his rules. He never checked up on me out of care, only to make sure he could still control me.

"Yeah, my classes are keeping me busy," I said. "And hockey's starting soon."

"Don't be afraid to ask for help if all becomes too much," Matthew said, Anne nodding in agreement. "There are so many resources for class help. Go to tutors, get to know your professors. They'll help."

I nodded, though I knew I probably wouldn't take his advice. This was a conversation Matthew and I had multiple times before I went off to school. He had been concerned from the start, and I knew his concern was much different than that of my own father. My father was only concerned with hockey, wanting me to be the best, to beat everyone. College, to him, was just a stepping stone to getting to the pros. It was a dream of his that he never actualized, so now it was supposed to be mine.

"Are you hungry?" Anne asked after a moment. "I'll cook something up."

"No, I'm fine," I said, shaking my head. "I'm going to go hang out with Livi, so we'll probably eat."

Anne nodded. "Do you need some money?"

I shook my head. "I have some."

I hated taking money from them, but they didn't give me much of a choice. Matthew wired money into my account every so often. I tried not to spend it because I hated the fact that I had to rely on them financially, but it wasn't like I could get a job during hockey season.

I put my things up in my room, and then Matthew let me borrow his car so I could drive to the ice rink where Livi currently was for her figure skating practice. I pulled around to the back of the building and saw her leaning against the back door. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun and her sweatshirt was zipped all the way up. She was scowling down at the ground, and I couldn't tell if she was angry or if that was just how she looked. The both of us had severe resting bitch face, so it was hard to tell.

She looked up when she saw me stop in front of her and she smiled before getting into the car.

"Hey!" she exclaimed, reaching over to wrap her arms around me.

"Hey," I said with a chuckle, patting her on the arm.

I moved the car and parked it out of the way behind the building. It wasn't likely that our parents would be lurking around here, but I didn't want to take any chances.

"How was practice?" I asked her.

Livi rolled her eyes. "Sucked. Colleen Andrews is getting better than me every day. Dad wants me to go Tonya Harding on her."

I scoffed. "Of course, he does."

"You'd know all about that," she replied with a giggle.

That was the thing with our dad. He wanted us both to be the best, no matter what it cost. He'd have us injuring anyone better than us rather than just accepting the fact that they were. That was what he wanted me to do last year at The Masters Tournament to Elijah Ellis and his team.

They were the better team and we would lose to them, everyone knew it. Dad thought it would be a good idea for me to injure their best players before we had to play them, Dave was on board with injuring Elijah and Fox, and I almost went through with it. I had seen them at the pool one night and went there with some of my teammates with the intention of

hurting them. I shoved Fox, but even as I did that, I knew I wasn't going to finish what I started. Fox had overpowered me anyway. But I knew there would be hell to pay with my father when he found out I didn't do anything, even if we ended up winning the game.

And even though he was angry with me for starting a fight on the ice, to him, it was better than coming back home a loser.

My father had turned me into an angry, violent person with no dignity or integrity. And now he was trying to do the same thing to Olivia.

"I'm not going to do it," Livi added. "Colleen's better than me, so what?" That was how I knew my sister was so much better than I was.

"Don't let him force you into something like that," I said. "He doesn't care about the consequences. He just wants you to win."

"I know, Mom's the same way," she replied with a sigh. "Only she thinks Colleen's better than me because she follows a stricter diet and is in better shape than me. She tried to feed me plain oatmeal this morning and packed me lettuce and carrots for lunch. Not salad, *lettuce* ."

I scoffed in response. Our parents were crazy about just about everything. That included our diets. When I lived at home, Dad watched what I ate like a hawk to make sure I followed the strict diet he laid out for me.

"So I put that lettuce on a nice, juicy burger," Livi told me, grinning as she let out a loud laugh.

I chuckled along with her, but I still found it hard to think lightly of this situation. Our mother basically wanted her daughter to starve.

"Other than that, they haven't been too awful, have they?" I asked, looking away from her. I could see her stare at me through the corner of my eye.

"Nothing I can't handle," she said after a few moments. "They're really strict about my phone because they don't want me talking to you, and they try to force me to go to the rink every day, but they're not nearly as hard on me as

they were with you. Especially not Dad. He still thinks I'm his little princess."

"Well, let him think that," I told her, still looking straight ahead. "You don't need him to start being hard on you."

I had no idea how he would treat Livi if he knew she had been in contact with me. I would like to think he wouldn't be as harsh with her as he was with me, but I wasn't too sure.

Livi pulled one knee up to her chest and tilted her head to look at me.

"You don't need to worry so much, you know," she said. "He doesn't treat me like he treated you." *Yet* .

I just nodded in response.

"Can we go get ice cream or something?" Livi asked. "And you can tell me about college, about any *cute boys* ." She looked at me expectantly, her eyes wide with wonder and he grin taking up her whole face.

My eyes widened and I let out a breathy laugh, putting the car into drive.

"There are no boys," I told her.

"There *has* to be."

"Well, there isn't." There would never be. I was content with being alone forever.

"You need to put yourself out there," Livi said as we pulled away from the rink. "You'll find someone."

"I don't want anyone."

She looked at me like she didn't believe me but she dropped the subject.

The two of us went to a diner the next town over to hopefully avoid seeing anyone that knew our parents. I ordered plain vanilla ice cream while Livi

ordered some sugary mess and a plate of fries. When we got to our table, she put the fries in the middle of the table and instantly dipped one into her ice cream.

My face scrunched in disgust.

"That's gross," I told her.

"You know what's gross?" she asked, popping the ice cream covered fry into her mouth. "Plain vanilla ice cream. Boring."

"Boring doesn't mean gross."

She hummed in agreement, dipping another fry in her ice cream.

"You know they made Jimmy Murphy captain of the hockey team for this season," Livi told me.

I tilted my head in confusion. "What? Why? He's a junior this year."

He was only a year ahead of Livi in school, and the two of them became friends last year when Livi started high school. He was an okay kid, nothing special.

"There are rumors his dad is giving money to the school for the hockey team," she continued. "And that's why they named him captain before the season even started."

That would be enough to secure him as captain. If there was one thing private schools loved, it was getting money.

"Is that Elijah over there?" Livi asked, nodding her head toward a table across the room.

I slowly turned around and saw that it was Elijah. And some kids. And Fox. And Wren.

I made eye contact with Elijah, and he looked at me with a surprised expression before waving. This caused the rest of the table to look over at

me, and I got looks of pure hatred from Fox and one of the girls. Wren's mouth quirked up in a subtle, amused grin.

I tore my eyes away from them and looked back at Livi.

"Hurry up and finish your ice cream. We're leaving," I rushed out.

"Don't rush me."

"I'm serious," I hissed, giving her a stern stare. "Hurry up or throw the rest away."

Livi rolled her eyes and stood up from the table, going to the counter. The cashier handed her a box and plastic spoons. She came back to the table and put the rest of her fries in the box, and the two of us scurried out of the diner.

I didn't spare one last look at that table.

***

Wren Ridley

"Your face is going to get stuck like that if you don't stop glaring," Elijah said, poking Fox's cheek.

"His face is already stuck like that," I added, causing Fox to turn his glare on me.

Fox had been scowling at the exit of the diner we sat in ever since Landon fled through it like he was running from the police. Even Ava had stopped glaring once Landon was gone. But Fox was the type to hold a grudge. I would know since I had often been on the other end of one of his grudges.

"Am I the only person who remembers the type of person Landon is?" Fox argued, looking around at everyone at the table. Ava and Fawn weren't paying attention because they were too busy giggling at something on Fawn's phone. Colt wasn't paying attention because he was playing a game on his. "Or did everyone just forget?"

"Trust me, I remember," Elijah said, leaning back in his seat. "I just think it's better to forgive him and move on. He's been through more than we even know about."

"Fuck that," Fox replied. "He's a piece of shit and he's lucky I didn't go over there and beat the shit out of him."

Elijah rolled his eyes and the two of us shared a look that Fox quickly caught onto.

"Don't look at each other like that," he snapped. "You two aren't ganging up on me."

I held my hands out in defense. "I didn't say anything."

Fox scoffed. "You always have something to say."

"All I have to say is I don't know how Elijah puts up with you."

Elijah grinned. "With lots of patience."

Fox huffed in annoyance and crossed his arms over his chest, a pout settling onto his face. Elijah's grin widened as he ruffled Fox's hair and kissed his cheek, a small smile barely breaking through on Fox's face.

Not telling Fox about how I drove Landon home and have been seeing him around Providence more often than not proved to be the right choice. It would only have made him even angrier, and I didn't want to be the one on the receiving end of it. Our relationship was fragile enough as it was. I didn't need to add anything else into the mix.

"Whatever," Fox said with a scoff. "All I'm saying is Landon should have gotten far away from here after graduation. I don't care that he's gay, he still treated Elijah like shit, and barely even apologized after you saved his ass."

I had almost forgotten that Landon was actually gay. I didn't know the specifics of the situation that had happened their senior year, but I knew enough to know that Landon had moved in with one of his friends. That was all I had heard from Fox and Elijah about the whole ordeal.

"Can we not talk about this?" Elijah asked. "I'd rather just forget all that happened and coexist with Landon."

Fox didn't look like he lied that one bit, but he appeased his boyfriend anyway, and the two sat even closer together, Fox smiling like an idiot at even the smallest grin Elijah gave him.

Looking at the two of them made me sick. I couldn't imagine being so devoted to someone that even looking at them put you in a better mood.

I thought it was a load of bullshit. I knew Fox and Elijah were happy together, and my parents were happy together, but the thought of loving someone so much that even being in their presence put you in a better mood seemed ridiculous.

Being known as someone else's *person* , that if you are somewhere, they are not far behind. Consulting them before anything, making them a permanent fixture in your life. The sound of their laugh being the best sound you ever heard. It was all bullshit. Some people were just too blinded by love to see it.

Once everyone was done with their food, we brought the girls and Colt home. Mom and Dad were out with their friends, leaving me with the kids and the couple who decided to start making out on the couch.

I scoffed, sitting down on the other couch and kicking my feet up on the coffee table before turning on the TV.

I did my best to ignore them until Fox got up from the couch and went to the bathroom.

"Oh, I didn't know you were still down here," Elijah said with a sheepish expression, his cheeks turning a shade of pink.

"Been down here the whole time," I told him. "You two could just go make out in his room. He still has one here."

"I know, he's just..." Elijah trailed. I turned to look at him. Now I was interested in whatever Elijah had to say. "He's been kinda down lately because he misses Ian and he hasn't been answering his texts. I just want to make him happy."

"You do make him happy. It's nauseating."

Elijah's expression deadpanned, obviously not amused by me.

"I'm telling you this because maybe you should talk to him," Elijah said.

"You seriously think Fox wouldn't want to punch me in the face if I started talking to him about his feelings?"

"I know you two are still working things out, but your relationship is a lot better than it was. Maybe he would appreciate you talking to him, letting him know that he can go to you."

Elijah was too optimistic for his own good. Fox and I were still just barely getting along, and I wasn't going to jeopardize that by getting into his business even though he had tried getting into mine before. Fox was hot-headed, so was I. We couldn't have a heart to heart and I doubted either of us wanted to, though I was concerned for my brother and wanted to know these things about him.

"Oh, you're still down here?" Fox asked as he re-entered the room.

I rolled my eyes at him and didn't respond.

Fox held his hand out for Elijah and pulled him up from the couch before the two of them went up the stairs. And I finally got some alone time.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

What did you think about Landon's sister and their relationship? What about finding out that Landon's father had wanted him to injure Fox and Elijah last year?

07

Wren Ridley

To: Lance
Come outside.

From: Lance
What the fuck
Are you at my house

To: Lance
Why else would I be telling you to come outside?

From: Lance
leve
Leave

To: Lance
Do you have trouble spelling?

From: Lance
Go away
Stop texting me

To: Lance
So, is it safe to assume you don't need a ride back to school?

It was only a minute later that Landon stomped out of the front door of his house, his bag slung around his shoulder, glaring at my car with his hair hanging down in front of his eyes. He opened the door, threw his bag in the backseat, and got in before slamming the door shut and pulling his seatbelt on.

I knew he was going to be moody when I showed up at his house, and that was part of the reason why I did it. There was something so entertaining

about how easy it was to rile Landon up. He reminded me of Fox in that sense, but then I looked at him with his face turned in a frown, his jaw clenched tightly and how that squared his jawline, and I wished I hadn't thought of my brother in that moment at all.

I was treading on dangerous territory with Landon, and I didn't know why I had even cared to see him so angry with me, why it made me want to see him all the more. It was sickening and wrong, yet I wouldn't let myself feel shame over it.

"How did you even know I'd still be home?" Landon grumbled, looking down with his arms crossed over this chest.

"Because I knew you'd be contemplating texting me all day because you *really* don't want to take the bus, and it seems like you don't want to ask the Hansons for help," I started, tapping my fingers against the steering wheel. "But you have too much pride to text me for a ride, so I made the decision for you while I was feeling generous."

Landon shook his head. "You're so fucking weird."

I shrugged. "Maybe, but you're desperate."

He glared at me as I shifted the car into drive and pulled away from the curb. My book playing softly was the only sound in the car. Landon must not have had the energy to make a big deal out of it, but I found it hard to concentrate on the words with him letting out sighs of annoyance every few seconds.

I paused the book without saying a word, but that only caused him to let out another sigh.

"Seriously?" he asked.

"What?"

"We're going to sit in silence, *again* ."

"I can't listen to my book with somebody making so much noise in the passenger seat," I told him. "I'm surprised you're not fogging up my windows with all your heavy breathing."

Landon gaped at me, then shut his mouth before opening it again to speak.

"You are insufferable," he said.

I let out an impressed hum. "I'm surprised you know that word."

"I'm surprised I got in this car with you again."

"I'm not. I knew you would," I said. "However, you were quick to leave when I saw you at that diner."

"Just shut up." He said it without any conviction in his voice.

Part of me felt like he wanted me to say these things that made him feel bad about himself, like it was a form of punishment he put himself through for what he had done in the past. I didn't know whether to indulge in it or not give him what he wanted.

We sat in silence for the rest of the ride. Once we got back into the city, I had Landon give me directions to his dorm building

"I think I know why you left the diner so quickly the other night." I said it because I couldn't help myself, because some twisted part of me needed to see his reaction.

"Turn left and shut up."

"You feel guilty for whatever you did to Elijah. You can't even look at him and you don't want to be confronted by him or Fox. So, you ran."

He didn't answer me. He just clenched his fists and his teeth, like he was holding back a hard punch and his sharp tongue.

"Because you know you hurt them for nothing other than being exactly what you are," I continued as I pulled up to his building. "And you beat

them with the thought that if you hurt them enough, it would change something about you and it didn't. You're just the same with more guilt."

I parked the car, turned to face Landon, and at the last second saw a fist coming for my face just before it made contact and sent me jolting backward.

I barely had time to register what had happened before Landon pulled his bag from the backseat and got out of the car, slamming the door shut behind him.

Once I came to my senses, I touched my face where he had punch me and winced in pain. Then I laughed.

And even though it hurt my face to do it, I laughed all the way home.

**

Landon Reilly

My knuckles felt like they were splitting from how hard I had hit Wren, but when I looked down at them the skin was just red, not broken. I cursed at myself as I flexed my hand. He had gotten under my skin, but I had become too angry and that wasn't supposed to be who I was anymore.

Part of me felt like he deserved it. He only said those things to make me angry. But I also knew it only made me angry because it was all true. It didn't really matter. I shouldn't have punched him, no matter what he said or how angry he made me.

I was still flexing my hand and looking down at it when I opened the door to my dorm room. When I entered the room and looked up, I saw my roommate Kyle with a girl on top of him and quickly averted my gaze.

"Oh shit. Sorry Landon," Kyle said, sounding embarrassed. "I should've put a sock on the door or something."

It really wasn't that big of a deal. It was just shocking to walk in on.

"It's fine. I'll go," I said, turning to leave without looking up at them.

"Wait," the girl said, causing me to pause my movements. "I know you from somewhere."

I looked up and immediately looked down again when I saw that she had turned to face me, topless. I heard her get off the bed and saw her bend down to pick her shirt up off the floor. Only after she had a shirt on did I look up again.

"The other night," she continued. "At the bar. I was with Wren. He brought you back to his place."

I frowned at her. Little did she know that I had just been with Wren and he made me so angry that I lashed out.

"You probably don't remember at all," she said. "You were pretty blacked out."

"Yeah, I don't remember," I muttered, hoping to ending the conversation with that.

"Well, I'm Stella," she said. "And if you ever want to go out with a group of people who won't leave you drunk and alone, you should come with us. Wren said he knew you from home."

"Sort of."

Stella smiled and looked back at Kyle.

"You should both come out with us this weekend," she offered. "It's a fun time."

I was about to deny her when Kyle spoke up.

"Sure," he said.

"Perfect! I'll text you," Stella said, grabbing her phone and keys from his desk and making her way toward the door. "Bye!" And with that she walked

by me and out the door and I shut it behind her.

I stood in silence for a moment, not daring to look over at Kyle.

"Sorry, for uh, walking in," I said, looking down at the floor.

"It was my fault. We had already hooked up, we were just going for another round," Kyle said. I looked up to see him shrugging from his bed. "It's not a big deal."

All I did was nod and go over to my side of the room. I threw my bag onto my bed and started unpacking my things, my knuckles stinging any time something brushed against them.

I forced myself to take deep breaths, hoping to rid myself of the anger and embarrassment I had felt in the last ten minutes. My therapist wouldn't be happy to hear that I had punched some dude who had just driven me home, but I hadn't seen her since I started school and I hadn't made an appointment with the school's counselor like she had asked me to.

Even without having seen my therapist for a while, I knew she would encourage me to make amends with whoever I harmed with my anger.

So, on Monday morning toward the end of my run, I walked into the coffee shop nearby with the expectation of Wren being there. He was there, but to my surprise, he wasn't in his running clothes.

Instead, Wren sat at a corner table with his eyes focused on his laptop. He wore a dark brown crew neck sweatshirt with BROWN written across the chest in white letters and light denim jeans that were cuffed at the ankle.

He didn't look up from his laptop as I walked further into the coffee shop and stood by the counter.

"Can I get a large hot coffee with oat milk?" I asked the guy at the counter. "And... whatever he gets?" I looked back toward Wren, pointing back at him with my thumb.

"Wren?" the guy at the counter asked. I nodded and he put in the order before asking for my name.

I waited until my name was called with the coffees before heading over to Wren's table and standing in front of him. It took him a moment to even notice I was standing there, but when he looked up at me, I finally saw the bruise on his cheek where my fist had been.

"Here," I said, shoving the coffee toward him and awkwardly looking away.

I heard Wren laugh as he took the cup from my hand.

"You bought me a coffee?" he asked. "How chivalrous."

I glared at him as he took a sip of the drink.

"And you knew my order. How nice."

"That's for punching you," I told him in a low tone.

"What, are you in anger management or something?" he asked. "They say you have to balance out your anger or something?"

He smiled over the rim of his cup, knowing he was just angering me again. He was the most infuriating person I had ever met. My anger made him giddy, like it was the most pleasant thing in the world. No normal person worked the way he did.

"Just shut up," I said, turning to walk away.

"Wait," Wren called out. I turned back to him again. He stared at me with a serious expression, like he was analyzing me all over again. "Come sit."

"What?"

"Sit," he said, gesturing toward the empty seat across from him. "You can't run back to campus with a coffee. Sit down."

I looked around the small coffee shop, and enough, every seat was taken in this place besides the one directly across from Wren. I slowly sunk down into the chair, keeping my eyes down at the drink in my hand as I sat across from Wren, who was still staring at me.

Wren let out a laugh and the sound grated at me. His laugh was pleasant, but always mocking.

"I'm actually happy you punched me last night," Wren said after a few moments of silent staring.

My head shot up to look at his smirking face, my eyes widening and my hand tightening around my coffee cup.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I spat.

"I deserved to get punched," he said. "Good for you, sticking up for yourself."

I gaped at him. Wren had to be the most confusing and disturbing creature I had ever come into contact with. There was no way he was actually sane.

"You're crazy," I said, letting out a heavy breath.

Wren just shrugged and looked back down at his laptop, reading through something on the screen.

"Are you going back home this weekend?," Wren asked, not even looking up from the screen. "Or are you hanging out with those assholes who left you last time?"

I scoffed. "That's not of your business."

Wren glanced up at me over the laptop screen.

"Doesn't seem like a grand idea to keep going out with the friends that leave you drunk and stranded at a bar, but I know you're not bright."

I rolled my eyes. "Those aren't my friends. And I don't go out. Especially after last time."

Wren blinked and I started to feel uncomfortable under his stare.

"So you don't have any friends?"

"No." And I didn't want any.

"At all?"

" *No.* "

Wren started to look confused, like he was tearing through his brain to come up with some sort of explanation and falling short.

"You're closing people off," he finally responded.

I let out a long sigh. "Can you not analyze me right now? Remember how well it went last time?"

"But you regret that," he said, gesturing toward the coffee I bought him as a peace offering.

"That doesn't make me any less likely to punch you again."

"Well, that isn't going to deter me."

I let out another sigh and placed my face in my hand, trying to breathe slowly to keep myself from getting angry.

"Fine, yes, I have no friends and I spend most of my time alone in my dorm room," I told him. "You're right. I close people off and that's how I want to keep it. Is that what you want to hear? You're right?"

Wren frowned at me and it occurred to me that I'd never seen an expression quite like this on his face. It was like he was upset, confused, and disgusted all at the same time.

"Why am I feeling bad for you?" he asked, though it seemed more like he was asking himself that question. "I don't feel bad for people."

"Okay," I said, standing up from the table. "I'm leaving."

Wren nodded. "Thanks for the coffee. I'm sure you'll be feeling the need to get me another one soon enough."

I didn't even acknowledge that as I scurried through the coffee shop and walked out the door. When I discretely looked through the window at Wren, he was already looking back at his laptop, furiously typing away.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter? Were you surprised Wren when to pick Landon up? What about their conversation in the car and Landon punching Wren? And Landon buying Wren a coffee?

08

Wren Ridley

There was a reason why I never let myself feel guilty or shameful. I hated being wrong, loathed it, so much that I forced myself to stand by my actions and words, to reject guilt and embrace the way I was. Being around Landon only made me realize this more.

Perhaps I hated him irrationally, or only because Fox did. Because although I'd never admitted to the guilt I felt over the way I had treated Fox throughout our lives, I felt the need to somehow avenge Fox for how Landon had treated him, to protect him.

But then Landon had to go and show that he was actually human who felt remorse and ruined everything, ruined any justifications I had conjured up in my mind for constantly antagonizing him.

I had always felt that people were too easy to read. Most of them wore their emotions plainly through their facial expressions and body language. That made me focus on hiding my own, making sure nobody knew anything about me that I didn't allow them to. But I was beginning to feel like I actually didn't know anything about Landon at all, despite the ways his emotions were easily detectable and he was easily agitated.

"You don't have class today?" Anthony, one of the workers at the coffeeshop and fellow Brown University student, asked as he wiped down the table next to mine.

I looked at the time to see that it was just after the start time of my first class. I had been sitting here and writing all morning without even feeling the passage of time.

"Canceled," I lied, making sure to save my work before shutting my laptop.

Anthony nodded, moving onto another table to clean. The coffeeshop had quieted down some. The early morning rushes were always the busiest times. That was why I had to get here early to secure a spot to sit and write. It was hard for me to write at night with James in the room. He snored like a chainsaw and if for some reason he woke up in the middle of the night, he wouldn't leave me alone if he saw me awake. It was just as loud in here in the mornings, but the sounds were not nearly as irritating as James's snoring.

"Who was that guy with you earlier?" Anthony asked. "He asked for your coffee order."

"Just someone who owed me a favor," I replied, sliding my laptop into my bag and standing from the table. "His name's Lance, just so you know for when he comes in."

"He's cute," Anthony said with a grin.

"He wouldn't go for you, I'm afraid," I said, though I had no idea who Landon would actually go for. To me, he seemed hell bent on staying away from everybody all the time.

"But he would go for you?" Anthony laughed. His laugh was high pitched, which James found endearing and infectious. He and Anthony had dated briefly in the past, but for some reason had stopped seeing each other. That was all James had told me about the ordeal.

"I never said that," I replied.

"He looked all nervous to go talk to you," he told me.

"Interesting," I replied, pulling my bag over my shoulder and picking up my coffee cups. "Anyway, I have to go make sure James got out of bed this morning."

I grinned when Anthony grimaced at the sound of James's name leaving my mouth. Whatever had happened between them was bad enough that even

hearing his name made Anthony uncomfortable, which was exactly what I needed to make my exit without any more conversation.

When I got back to the dorm room, James was out of bed, but clearly not in class as he paced around our room with a book in hand, scouring the pages.

"What are you doing?" I asked, shutting the door behind me.

"Studying," he said, stopping his pacing but never taking his eyes off the book.

"If you actually went to class, you wouldn't have to study so hard," I told him, dropping my bag down on my bed.

"Thanks, didn't ask," James replied, turning the page before looking up from the book to set his gaze on me. "Where were you this morning anyway? I woke up and you weren't here."

"I was in class," I lied, leaning back against my bed.

He looked at his watch. "Your class doesn't get out for another twenty minutes."

"Got let out early," I told him. "Professor had to be somewhere."

James scoffed, tossing his book aside. "See, this is why I don't bother going to class sometimes because these professors are wasting our time."

I just nodded in agreement. James would think of any excuse or justification for not going to class and run with it. It wasn't because he was lazy or irresponsible. I truly believed he didn't go because none of his classes actually challenged him. Although he did a good job at hiding it, James was incredibly intelligent, and if a class wasn't challenging him, he just simply wouldn't go and would go through all the material on his own.

"I talked to Anthony at the coffee shop," I told him and his eyes widened for a fraction of a second before he wiped anything other than indifference from his face.

"That's cool," James replied. And I had to give it to him. If I didn't already know James was uncomfortable at the mention of Anthony, I would have thought he was truly indifferent. "Are you going to the rest of your classes today or do you want to hang out?"

"I'm going to my classes."

"So you don't want to have sex or anything right now?"

I laughed. "No."

James sighed and picked his book up.

A moment later, there was a loud knock on our door, and when I opened it, Stella came into the room beaming. Her expression faltered for a moment when she saw me.

"What happened to your face?" she asked, gesturing toward my bruise.

"Walked into a door," I lied.

She didn't look like she believed me, but she wasn't about to question me about it either.

"Guess what," she said to me, sitting on top of my desk.

"Hm?"

"Come on," she said. "Guess who I just saw."

"How am I supposed to guess that?" I asked incredulously. "There are seven billion people in the world and I'm supposed to guess the *one* you saw?"

Stella rolled her eyes. "You're so annoying. You *know* this person. That narrows it down don't you think?"

"I know a lot of people."

"Oh my God." She shook her head. "The guy from the bar! The one you know from home that you took here the other night!"

"When was this?" James asked, not even looking up from his book.

"That night you were so drunk you rolled off of my bed and hit the floor so hard I thought you died," she told him.

"I have no memory of that."

"Why is this important?" I asked, growing impatient. I felt something strange and unrecognizable. I couldn't tell if I was annoyed at the mere mention of Landon or if I was anxious to hear what she had to say about him. Neither option was preferable.

"Because I saw him at Kyle's–"

"Who's Kyle?"

"A guy I hooked up with, anyway, I saw him at Kyle's," she continued. "Apparently they're roommates. And I invited him to come out with us this weekend."

I felt a jolt from within me, but I didn't let the surprise show on my face.

"Why?" I asked, keeping my voice even.

"Because I feel bad that his friends left him last time," she said. "He should be able to go out and not have to worry about being left alone while he's drunk. And you two know each other."

"Barely."

This was the thing with Stella. She always felt the need to get to know everyone. It was why she had so many casual friends and very little close ones. She wanted to know everyone and their business while only letting few people know her. She was friendly to a fault.

There was no use thinking on it too long. Landon wouldn't show up anyway.

***

Landon Reilly

I wished that getting back on the ice would have given me some sort of relief, like I was back on my feet again and feeling like I belonged. But that really wasn't the case. With hockey practice starting up, I now had no excuse to avoid any of my teammates. I would have to start seeing them every day and endure them trying to get me to become one of them when I really just wanted to be left alone.

Most of the team was just standing around on the ice while we waited for practice to officially start. Some of us were doing laps around the ice. I was one of those, skating around the perimeter of the rink with the hopes to keep myself busy and have no one try to talk to me.

But when the coaches made their way to the ice, everyone gathered.

Coach Foreman and Assistant Coach Carter stood in front of the team. There were about thirty or forty of us and only half of us would actually get to play in games. The coaches might rotate the roster a bit and allow for some of the younger guys like me to have some ice time in games with our less competitive opponents, but the reality was that most of us wouldn't get to play that much.

"I want all of us to have a good season on and off the ice," Coach Foreman started, gathering the attention of all the players. "And that means I expect everyone's best efforts for the entire duration. And for the veteran players, I expect you to take care of the rookies, guide them. Remember how you felt your freshman year."

Coach Foreman went on to talk about all his expectations for the season. The many practices during the week, that we had to keep our grades up, that no one's position was permanent and we had to earn it.

The team seemed to perk up once we started doing some drills. The team captain, senior Chris Rojas, was leading the drills. He had been someone I had kept tabs on while I was still in high school and watching college hockey from home, though I never thought I'd play with him. Back then I was still thinking I'd be going to Notre Dame.

By the time practice was over, I was ready to shower and get into bed, but before I could get off the ice, Rojas skated in front of me and caused me to halt.

"What's your name again?" he asked me. He was the type to look at you with so much attention with he was talking to you, like the whole world around you was a blur.

"Landon Reilly," I said, my voice bland and my expression blank.

"You're quite good, Reilly," Rojas replied.

Everyone around here went by their last names, I had noticed. This wasn't something we did at my high school. It was really only reserved for the guys who had the same first names. There were way too many Johns and Noahs and Jameses for those to go by their first names.

"Thanks," I muttered in response to Rojas.

He patted me on the shoulder twice before turning to leave the ice.

"Keep it up!"

I waited a moment before following him to the locker room.

I used to never dread going to the locker room, but since my sexuality was not exactly a secret anymore, it became a stressful situation. Part of the problem was that I had no idea who exactly knew about my sexuality, who just ignored it, or who didn't know at all.

These thoughts of worry also made me think about what I had done to Elijah in this situation. Micah telling me in a hush that he was worried for Elijah because of what he had told him, me getting angry and letting the

whole team know just because of how Elijah's sexuality made *me* feel, hitting him, letting others hit him. It all came back and it made me want to throw up every time I stepped foot in a locker room. It made me simultaneously scared for that treatment and wishing for it just to get a taste of what I put him through.

But of course, nothing happened. All the guys were in good spirits after our first practice and were making plans to go out together this weekend. That was what I wanted to avoid. I wanted to play hockey and go home.

Cooper, who I had learned was actually John Cooper, clapped me on the shoulder as I stood at my own stall after I had quickly showered and changed into my clothes.

"Landon!" he exclaimed. "You'll go out with us this weekend, right? Jess said she saw you on Friday and you went home with someone! Good for you!"

I shook his hand off me and did my best not to snap at him. He was one of the ones that left me there. He was why I had to get dragged back to Wren's dorm.

"Maybe," I said shortly, hoping to stop the conversation there.

Luckily, my phone started ringing, and I had never been so happy for Micah to call me.

"Gotta take this, see you later," I said before grabbing my bag and rushing out of the locker room and answering the phone. "Hello?"

"Hi, you haven't called in a while," Micah replied. "Dad said you went home this weekend. How was it?"

I let out a long breath as I stepped outside and started walking back to my dorm.

"It was good," I told him. "I spent some time with Olivia."

"Oh yeah? How is she?"

"She seemed good," I replied. I didn't want to tell him that I thought she was hiding how bad things really were at home. Even Micah and his parents didn't know exactly how horrible our parents actually were.

"Did you start hockey yet?" Micah asked, though I knew he already knew the answer to that. I was sure he had my whole schedule memorized better than I did.

"Just left practice," I told him. "Did you call for anything in particular?"

"You know I like to check in."

"Yeah, I know."

"Elijah said he saw you," Micah added and I stopped in my tracks.

"You talked to Elijah?"

"We keep in touch," he replied. "He just mentioned it."

I didn't respond, wanting to get off the topic of Elijah immediately.

"Anyway, you'll have to keep me up to speed with what's going on with you now that we're both starting hockey," Micah continued. He probably knew the mention of Elijah made me uncomfortable.

"Yeah, sure, Micah," I said, jogging across the street to get to my building.

"Maybe I'll come down there some time when we both have a little time off," he suggested.

He would be sorely disappointed if he did. All I did to pass the time was work out and sit in my room doing nothing. And of course there was the fact that he would most likely find out that I haven't set up any appointments with a counselor here like my therapist wanted, and he would be on me about it.

"If you want," I replied as I stepped into my building. "Listen, Micah, I gotta go, okay?"

"Alright," he said. "Promise you'll call soon?"

"Sure." Though I was sure I'd forget and he'd be the one to end up calling anyway. He probably knew that too but just wanted to seem like he wasn't being overbearing by calling my phone all the time.

"Okay. Talk to you later."

"Bye."

Kyle wasn't in the room when I got back, and I was grateful for that. After seeing him with Stella that morning, I was hoping not to see him again for a while.

After changing into pajamas, I turned all the lights off, pulled the curtains over the window, and went to sleep.

**

Thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter.

09

Landon Reilly

By the time hockey practice ended on Friday evening, I was ready to sleep for twelve hours straight. When I stepped foot into the room, Kyle standing in the doorway, just about to leave.

"Hey, are you coming out with me and Stella?" he asked me, looking up from his phone.

"No, I'll pass," I said, moving past him to place my bags down.

Kyle shrugged. "Okay, later."

I relaxed down onto my bed once he left the room. My eyes closed, but I only had a few moments of peace before my phone was buzzing in my pocket.

From: Unknown

its livi going to call you from this number

About a minute later, the unknown number came up on my screen and I immediately answered it.

"What's up?" I asked her, holding my phone with one hand while putting my other over my face.

"Landon, I'm stressed," she said in a hurried tone.

I sat up. "Why?"

"Because Mom and Dad are psychos!" she exclaimed. "I overheard them talking about how they have to take you off their health insurance, and how they have to close your savings accounts and it's freaking me out!

I let out a sigh, trying to think of the right thing to say to my sister. She knew this thing with my parents wasn't going to just blow over, but hearing them talk about such permanent things, about really severing all ties with me must have been hard for her.

"And they want to give me your car and I told them absolutely not!" Livi continued frantically. "If they want to be assholes then I'm going to make it as difficult as possible for them."

"Liv, no," I interjected. "Just go along with them. It'll be easier for you."

"No!" she exclaimed. "What about you? They're taking everything from you and they don't even care! What if something happens and you show up to the hospital with no health insurance?"

"I have health insurance through school."

"And they're just taking away money that they specifically put away *for you* and leaving you with nothing!" she yelled. "Who the hell does that? What is wrong with them?"

"Olivia," I said in an effort to calm her down. "Don't worry about me, okay?"

It was enough that I had to worry about myself and what I was going to do with my future. I couldn't rely on the Hansons forever. But I didn't want to have to worry about Olivia worrying about me.

" *Landon,* " she said in an exaggerated tone. "You need to do something. I don't know what, but you need to do it."

"There's nothing I can do," I told her. "And it's okay. I don't need them or their money. I'm fine with how things are." That was a bit of a stretch, but she didn't need to know that.

Livi didn't respond.

"I'm okay," I reassured her. "Don't stress about it."

"Okay," she replied after a moment, taking a deep breath. "It just freaks me out when they talk like that."

"I know."

Livi and I only stayed on the phone for a few more minutes before hanging up. Whenever she used someone else's phone to call me, we were on borrowed time. She was probably at the ice rink at this time of night, using the phone of one of the other figure skaters she trained with.

Even though I had told my sister not to stress out, that phone conversation had stressed me out to the max. I was hoping my parents wouldn't touch the money they had put away for me before I could move it to a new account, if I could even do that. I had no idea how any of that worked or if they made sure I couldn't touch it without their permission. But now it was as good as gone and I had no idea what I was going to do.

I tried sleeping, but I spent the whole time tossing and turning, not able to keep my eyes closed for more than a few minutes at a time. I shook my leg under the covers, a nervous habit of mine that I really needed to break. I hadn't noticed it much until Wren had pointed it out in the car.

I needed something to get the edge off, something to make me relax and forget about what I had just talked about with Livi.

The first thing that came to mind was not something I wanted to do. But I knew there was a bar in town that didn't check IDs, one where there would be people I knew. The one Stella had invited Kyle and I to. There were a few problems with going there. One was that some of my teammates were most likely there, and I wasn't looking to get too close with them socially. An even worse problem was that Wren was most likely going to be there, and he would automatically put me on edge.

But I wanted alcohol and that was the only place I could get it, so I got out of bed and changed into something more presentable and took the bus across town toward the bar.

It was crowded when I walked in, and initially, I didn't see anyone I knew which I took as a good sign. I quickly ordered my drink from the bar and looked around to locate a seat.

That was when my eyes landed on Wren sitting at a high top table with a bored expression on his face as he looked into a book. Stella, Kyle, and a couple other people stood around the table, all with drinks in their hands.

"Landon?" someone called from beside me. I looked to see that it was Jess with a kind smile looking up at me.

"Oh, hey," I awkwardly replied.

"I didn't think I'd see you here," she said.

"Yeah, well," I said with a shrug, taking a long sip of my drink.

"Do you know them?" Jess asked, pointing over to where Wren and his friends sat. Stella was calling out to me and waving her hands around to get my attention.

I grimaced. "Sort of. Not really." But I started walking over there any way with Jess following next to me.

"Kyle said you weren't going to make it!" Stella said with a wide smile. Her eyes were already glossed over and I could tell she had a bit to drink.

"Changed my mind," I muttered, glancing over at Wren who hadn't even bothered to look away from his book.

"And who's this?" Stella asked, gesturing toward Jess who was looking at her in awe.

"Uh, hi, uh I'm Jess," she timidly introduced herself. In the brief time I had known Jess, I didn't know her to be timid. She had no problem introducing herself to me.

"Jess," Stella repeated. "Nice to meet you, Jess. Do you want to come dance with me?"

Jess just nodded and allowed Stella to grab her by the hand and drag her toward the dancing crowd.

Kyle's attention was on whatever conversation he was having with the rest of the group. That left me awkwardly off to the side while Wren sat silently, turning the page in his book.

I quickly downed the rest of my drink and smacked the cup down on the table. That caused Wren to finally look up at me.

"You drank that fast," he said. "Having a rough night?"

"None of your business," I retorted, narrowing my eyes at him. "How are you even reading that in here?" It was so loud I could barely hear my own thoughts. I had to yell for Wren to hear me, but he didn't put much effort into being heard.

"Not everyone is easily distracted by a bit of noise," Wren replied, closing the book and putting it on the table. Who the fuck brings a book to the bar? I swore he just did it to let everyone know just how intelligent and intellectual he was.

I leaned forward, bracing my hands on the table in front of me and looking straight ahead. I could feel Wren's stare on me as he took a slow, long sip from his cup.

"Do not try to analyze me right now," I snapped. That only caused Wren to grin at me over the rim of his cup.

"I wasn't," he said.

"You're a liar."

"I am."

We held each other's stares for a moment, and I was the first to look away. I picked my glass up from the table and turned to go back toward the bar for another drink before Wren stopped me.

"Wait," Wren called out, causing me to turn back to him. He was holding out his own cup for me to take. "Grab me another water while you're at it."

I rolled my eyes at him and snatched the cup from his hand. I could tell by the way his eyes shined and how his lips turned up slightly that he was quite amused with the situation.

When I got to the bar, I slid the cups in an area where quite a few used cups had accumulated and ordered new drinks. Wren had picked up his book again when I reached the table where he sat. I put his drink in front of him and took a long sip of mine. When I placed my glass down on the table, Wren was looking at me over the book.

"What?" I snapped.

He chuckled. "I can't say. You told me not to analyze you."

I narrowed my eyes at him, bracing my hands on the table.

"Just say it," I said in a clipped tone. I knew I shouldn't give into his games, but I couldn't stand the thought of not knowing his judgements of me, of him laughing at me at some joke I wasn't in on.

"It's nothing really," he said, placing his book down on the table. His voice was smooth and sultry as always like he knew I would be hanging onto any word he said. "I just noticed you're drinking quite fast. Seems like there's something on your mind, something you're trying to temporarily forget."

"I'm on my second drink."

"In about twenty minutes," Wren added, raising his eyebrows. "Either you're trying to forget something, or there's so much pain and emotion within you that the only way to numb it is to get drunk."

I didn't answer him. His assumptions were right, of course. I wanted to forget about my parents and what Livi had told me. And maybe I was drinking to numb myself. I just hadn't thought of it like that.

"But I'm a man of my word and I will not be analyzing you tonight," Wren continued after my silence.

I scoffed. "No you're not." He just grinned. "Why do you even come here if you just sit and read?"

"Somebody has to make sure the drunks get back to the dorms alive," Wren answered.

"So, why don't you just pick them up after?"

"Because then I'd have to come back, try to find them," he said. "It's easier to stay."

He closed the book and left it laying in front of him with the cover facing down, not even bothering to mark the page he had left off on. He was probably one of those people that could just remember without really having to think about it.

Wren and I didn't converse much, and I was on my fourth drink when Cooper stumbled over with some other guys from the team.

"Reilly, you made it!" he exclaimed, tossing his arm around my shoulder. "Did you see Jess making out with some chick? It was so hot."

I pushed his arm off me and looked toward the crowd of people dancing to see that Jess was still dancing with Stella, closer than they had been before.

"Are you going to come drink with us?" Cooper asked, holding onto the table to keep himself up. The others he was with started moving toward the bar. He didn't wait for my response before he started following them, and I was glad for that.

"He was one of the ones that left you," Wren said. It wasn't a question. He said it like he knew it without me having to tell him.

"Yeah, well," I said, finishing off my fourth drink. I finally sat down on the bar stool across from Wren. It was getting harder to keep myself standing the more I drank.

"I can see how that happened," Wren said. "He can't even take care of himself."

I just shrugged. It was shitty getting left behind, and the thoughts of what could have happened if Wren hadn't dragged me back to his place were unpleasant. But I was done thinking about them. I knew those weren't my friends, and I didn't expect anything from them.

"Need another drink?" Wren asked, standing from the stool. "Next round is on me." He grabbed our glasses and headed to the bar.

While I waited for his return, I picked up the book he had left on the table. The words were blurry and moving when I tried to focus on them, but I could just make out the title on the cover: *The Secret History* .

I jumped back slightly when Wren returned and placed my drink in front of me.

"Are you learning how to read?" he asked me, sitting back on the stool.

I slid the book across the table back to him before taking a sip of my drink. Wren watched me as I did and as soon as I tasted the liquid, my face scrunched in disgust.

"This is water," I said, placing the cup back down.

"Very good," Wren said in a mocking tone. "I'm glad you could identify it."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Why did you give me water?"

"Because I think you should have some if you've been drinking," he said. "And you have."

I obliged him, though I wasn't happy about it. As soon as I finished the water, I went to the bathroom, then immediately went back to the bar for another drink.

Considering I didn't stop at that, it was no surprise that I ended up drunk with Wren looking annoyed at my very presence. I stood close to him,

holding myself up by holding onto the table. My arm brushed up against his and I leaned into him.

"I need to sleep now," I slurred, feeling my eyes start to shut.

"Yeah, you do," he replied. His eyes searched the crowd, presumably looking for his friends.

I didn't even notice when Stella and Jess came over to the table, and I could barely hear what they were saying.

"—Kyle?" Wren asked. I had only caught onto the end of his question.

"He left already," Stella said. "He went to hookup with someone."

The two of them continued to talk while I was leaning more and more on Wren. He eventually had to put his arm around my waist to hold me up. His hand lightly brushed my side where my shirt had ridden up slightly, and his touch gave me shivers.

I didn't catch onto the rest of what they were saying, but eventually, Stella, Jess, James, and me were being led by Wren to his car. Wren had gripped my waist tightly and threw my arm over his shoulder as we walked out of the bar and into the parking lot. Then he deposited me in the front seat and leaned over me to buckle my seatbelt.

When we were back at his dorm, he brought me up to his room with the same care, holding onto me so I wouldn't fall as I stumbled.

Stella and Jess disappeared into Stella's room while Wren brought James and I into his. James got into bed on his own and turned away from us while Wren helped me up into his bed.

As I looked at him, it felt like it was the first time I really *saw* him. Saw his clear, slightly tanned skin, his hard angled face and his sharp jaw, the way his face softened when he kept his expression neutral. It was like he was a different person.

"Wren," I said, placing my hand on his chest as he stood over me. He raised his eyebrows at me. "You're... nice."

He quirked his head to the side in confusion.

"Nice?"

"When you're not an asshole."

He frowned down at me. I moved my hand upward, up the side of his neck and put my fingers in his hair. His expression didn't change, and I didn't remember anything after that before falling asleep.

**

Thanks for reading! Please let me know what you thought of the chapter!

10

Landon Reilly

My eyes opening dragged me out of a deep sleep and I was momentarily confused at the unfamiliar room I was in until I remembered where I was.

I groaned, sitting up slightly by bracing my elbows behind me. The blanket fell from my body and revealed my bare chest. I looked down at myself in confusion, wondering when I had taken my shirt off.

"I took your shirt because you spilled beer on it," Wren said, startling me. He was sitting at his desk, his computer open in front of him as he turned around to face me on the bed. "And I didn't want my sheets to smell like beer. It's in the wash."

I squinted at him in confusion. "You washed my shirt?" My voice was raspy and low from sleep. Wren looked down at the floor.

"I had laundry to do," he said, bringing his eyes back to mine. "I figured since I'm so nice, I could add your shirt."

I pressed my lips tightly together as a grin grew on his.

"You're not going to let me live that down."

"No, not likely," he said, turning back to his computer.

I laid back down on the pillow, staring up at the ceiling for a moment before turning my head to look at Wren. He was typing something up on the computer, but I couldn't see what it was.

Then, he suddenly stood up and shut the computer before leaving the room. He came back a few minutes later with a laundry basket and began folding and hanging up clothes. Wren looked over at me and picked my shirt out from the basket before throwing it at me.

"Come on," he said. "Get up."

I glared at him. "I'm fucking hung over."

"Well, I'm going on a run and you're either coming with me or getting out of my room," Wren replied.

"I don't have any running clothes." I was still in my jeans from last night, and the sneakers I had worn at the bar were not for running.

"You can wear some of mine."

Wren pulled off the shirt he was wearing and my breath got caught in my throat. My eyes were wide as they looked him over. He was lean and tall, his torso long and his skin a golden tan. His stomach was nearly flat, but had a hint of ab muscles poking through that made his physique look so effortless.

I had never imagined what Wren's body looked like, but if I had it wouldn't have been like this. I would have thought he was a twig. But then I remembered the way he held me back from his brother all those months ago and how strong he was, and his impressive arms made sense.

All his muscles were soft and lean, though didn't look like they lacked any strength. He had a vein that ran up the length of his left arm, and I didn't know I'd find that attractive until just then.

I looked away from his arms and my eyes landed on his stomach which was even worse than his arms. My eyes locked on the hair that traveled down past the waist of his pants, and I quickly averted my gaze as he pulled a new shirt on so he wouldn't notice my staring. That was something he definitely wouldn't let me live down.

Wren glanced over at me and raised his eyebrows.

"Are you getting ready or are you going to keep pretending you weren't just staring at me?"

I scoffed and got out of the bed, pulling my newly washed shirt on over my head. The shirt was still a little warm from being in the dryer.

"I wasn't staring at you," I lied. I knew it was no use. He obviously knew that I was, but I would never admit something like that to him.

"No need to lie," he said with a shrug, pulling out two pairs of athletic pants and throwing one at me. "I have a nice body."

I scoffed again. I couldn't bring my eyes to meet his. If I did, all I would do was remember his shirtless body, the lean muscle, the vein on his arm, the hair on his stomach.

"Are you coming or what?" he asked, causing me to finally look at him again.

That was a mistake. This time he was taking off the pants he had been wearing, standing by the closet with just his boxers on before pulling on the athletic pants.

His legs were just as tan and lean as the rest of his body, and I hated him for looking like that, so gorgeous and maddening.

I had told myself I wouldn't look at any men just the same as I wouldn't look at any women to occupy my time or satisfy my urges. But Wren had literally ran into my life and it seemed like there was no way for me to get rid of him.

I pulled off my jeans and put on the pants he had given me and noticed they were a little long on me. Wren was taller than me, but only by about two inches. His waist was smaller than mine, causing him to have to tie the strings on the waist band.

Once I had Wren's pants on, I stopped in my tracks and wondered what the fuck I was actually doing. I shouldn't have been putting on his clothes, getting ready to go on a run with him. It was like my mind wasn't functioning. I just did whatever Wren told me to do. It was like he had hypnotized me.

Wren didn't say anything but he looked at me with an impatient expression, so I quickly put my shoes on and followed him out of the dorm. We passed by people who greeted Wren with a nod, no words exchanged.

The Brown campus looked just as I expected it to with brick buildings and walkways, red and orange leaves blanketing the ground beneath our feet. Once we were off campus, Wren picked up his pace to a jog and I followed after him.

He knew exactly where all the cracks in the sidewalk were, expertly dodging them while I trailed after him hoping not to stumble and watching him from behind as he ran.

My mind couldn't wrap itself around the idea that I was currently, willingly going on a run with Wren of all people. What was even worse was that it didn't feel unnatural.

It felt too normal, too comfortable. I wondered if he felt the same way.

Eventually we got to some familiar territory, passing through the area Wren and I had run into each other the first time, heading toward the coffee shop. We slowed as we approached the coffee shop and walked inside.

"Morning Anthony," Wren said, standing at the counter.

Anthony nodded at each of us. "Morning Wren, Lance."

I glared at the back of Wren's head as I heard him chuckle. Anthony looked confused, but he didn't mention it.

"What will it be today, Wren?" Anthony asked, bracing his hands on the counter.

"A medium iced vanilla chai latte," he answered. "And a medium cold brew with oat milk."

I stepped forward.

"You're not buying my coffee," I said. I wasn't even going to mention I didn't know what a cold brew was.

Wren waved me off and pulled his card from his wallet.

"I'm serious," I snapped. Wren just ignored me. It seemed like he wasn't the type to let anyone tell him what to do, not as easily persuaded as I was this morning.

Wren paid for the drinks and walked off to the side. I stood there stunned for a moment but eventually followed him.

"I think you need to be more adventurous with your coffee," he told me after an awkward pause.

"What is wrong with you?"

"You're the one that has the issue with someone buying your coffee," Wren replied. "You can get mine next time."

"Next time?" My eyes widened and my heartbeat quickened. "What, are you trying to make this a regular thing?"

Wren shrugged. "I just assume this isn't the last time I'll have to drag you out of a bar. It definitely wasn't the first." He took a long sip of his latte.

I just stared at him. Wren had a way about him that made me feel so dumb in comparison to him. It was in the way he looked at me and how he spoke, his mocking expression and matter of fact tone and the way he acted like he knew everything.

I looked away from him and sipped my coffee, pleasantly surprised by the taste.

***

Wren Ridley

I suspected there was something wrong with me last night when I had to physically cover Landon's body with my blanket to stop myself from looking at his bare chest. It felt too intimate and deranged.

What really solidified that there was something wrong with me was that my mind kept replaying the way he touched my chest just before he fell asleep. And what was worse was that instead of kicking him out first thing in the morning, I decided to take him on a run with me.

Because for some reason my logic was broken and my mind had decided on its own that I needed to take care of him when in reality I had no intention of ever taking care of anyone.

Landon looked so out of his element, sitting across from me and sipping on his coffee, wearing my clothes. The rational part of me wanted to leave him here, get out of his presence before I thought about him more. But my body didn't move. It stayed put across from him like it was telling me I needed to stay.

Something was definitely wrong with me because I had never wanted to stay in someone's company before. Landon intrigued me, and I wanted to believe it was because I liked getting him angry and riled up, but I couldn't pinpoint exactly the reason for it.

"You intrigue me," I told him. He looked at me strangely like I had grown two heads. It was a look I was used to seeing from him whenever I said anything that made him uncomfortable.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Landon hissed.

"You don't know what intrigue means?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, I know what intrigue means, but what *intrigues* you?"

I pondered for a moment. "I don't know."

We stared at each other, Landon at a loss for words and me trying to figure out the inner workings of my own brain. Maybe my intrigue for Landon was purely physical attraction. I wasn't beyond admitting to myself that I found him attractive, which was already quite unusual for me. And if it was only physical, I didn't need to worry about my mind deciding it *felt* something for Landon. That was highly improbable anyway.

All I needed was to sort out my physical attraction to him and this strange feeling I had would go away.

"I think we should have sex," I said.

Landon started choking on his coffee, the liquid splattering on the table in front of him. His coughs gained the attention of the people at surrounding tables, some looking at him with concern and others with irritation. I stared at him with a serious expression, willing him to stop and answer me.

He pounded on his chest and then his coughing stopped. Landon wiped his mouth with a napkin and cleaned up the coffee on the table, unable to meet my eyes.

"What the fuck, Wren?" he spat, still staring down at the table. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I was just thinking."

"Why were you thinking about *that* ?" he asked, still not looking at me.

Because this was the only rational explanation my mind could come up with as to why I wanted to be around him. Because there was no other reasoning for me allowing him to sleep in my bed and wear my clothes or inviting him to come with me this morning instead of kicking him out first thing.

"Because I'm intrigued," I told him. "Like I said. It's a suggestion, an offer."

"An offer?" Landon looked bewildered and downright irate at the same time. I wouldn't have been surprised if he punched me in the face again, and

I wasn't sure I'd mind it.

Landon stood up from his seat, slammed his hands down on the table, and leaned over it to come face to face with me.

"Don't you *ever* say something like that to me again," he hissed. His voice was low and menacing and did nothing to curb my attraction to him. "Whatever you think you know about me is not fucking true. I'm not like you, so don't you ever fucking say that to me again."

"That's not what it seemed like when you were watching me undress this morning," I said, a grin slowly forming on my face.

Landon's face was turning red, his hands forming fists on the table in front of us. I could tell he was trying to hold himself back from punching me. It was one thing to punch me in private, but it was a whole other thing to do it in public with witnesses.

"What are you going to do, Lance? Hit me?" I taunted.

"You infuriate me," he said through gritted teeth.

My grin widened. "Then a bit of hate sex might be worth your while."

He slammed his hand down on the table again, then stood up straight. He looked at me with disgust before picking his coffee up and turning to leave. He threw out his coffee on his way out the door and he didn't turn back as I watched him storm off.

"What the hell was that all about?" Anthony asked, walking over to my table.

"Oh, nothing," I said, sipping on my latte. "Lance just had somewhere to be."

Anthony looked at me like he knew I was lying, but didn't say anything about it.

After I finished my latte, I made my way back to the dorms and Stella immediately opened her door when she saw me in the hallway, like she was looking through the peep hole and waiting for my arrival.

"Wren, I think I'm in love," she said as I unlocked the door to my room.

"Disgusting," I said. Stella followed me inside the room and sat on top of my desk. Landon's jeans from last night were still thrown over my desk chair.

"I'm serious," Stella said with a wide smile. "I think I fell in love with Jess last night."

"And why would you do that?"

"I couldn't help it!" she exclaimed. "We didn't even have sex. We just made out and cuddled and talked and I *liked* it. I actually can't believe it."

"I can't either," I said. Stella was always as against love as I was.

"Anyway, how was your night with Landon?" Stella asked with a suggestive expression.

"Oh, you know, barely got any sleep because of all the passionate sex we had."

Her eyebrows practically flew to the top of her head.

"Really?"

"No."

Her eyes narrowed. "He was too drunk for that anyway. I knew you were lying."

"I'm sure you did."

If Stella only knew about my new found attraction to Landon. She would take that and run with it. She would never let it go. She would tell me I was

in love with him. And that was why I couldn't reveal that to her.

"Jess said she's kinda friends with him," Stella told me.

"So she's one of the ones that left him drunk and alone in a bar too?"

Stella faltered at that.

"Well, I don't know, maybe," she said.

I didn't respond, taking Landon's jeans and throwing them in my hamper.

Stella didn't stick around long and I was finally left alone long enough to work on more of my book after some homework.

Then, I got a text from my brother.

From: Fox
Mom's texting me to check on you because she's afraid of bothering you

It was rare I heard from Fox while we were both away at school. Even after somewhat repairing our relationship, we didn't spend much time keeping tabs on each other unless we were together. And that had made me forget how bad it would be if he found out I had been hanging around with Landon, or worse, if I didn't end up actually fucking him.

To: Fox
And what exactly is she trying to check up on?

From: Fox
Just text her ok
or call
She just said she hasn't heard from you since we were home last weekend
It wouldn't kill you to just call her sometimes idk why ur like this

To: Fox
Do you miss me so much that you're trying to start an argument over

text?

From: Fox
Maybe
We always have to have something to argue about
Just fucking call our mother more often so she doesn't worry about you it's not that hard

We didn't continue texting after that, and I did call our mother.

But now I had a pit in my stomach at the thought of how Fox would feel if he learned about Landon and me, about how that would damage our relationship, and I wondered how I let that slip my mind when I was thinking about what I wanted to do with Landon.

And now I knew for sure that there was something truly and undeniably wrong with me.

**

Thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter.

11

Landon Reilly

My pent up rage over the last few days was what was getting me through hockey practice. I was playing a physical game, something my coaches and Rojas liked to see. But hitting guys into the boards was really the only way for me to get all my anger out without punching someone, namely Wren.

I hated the way he made me feel and the way he knew exactly how to push me, to make me uncomfortable, to make me angry. But part of me also envied him and the way he was unapologetic and that made me even more angry.

As practice went on, I moved through the drills with the precision that was always expected of me throughout my entire time playing hockey. It was like this game had all my focus even though my mind was far away. I was running on autopilot and I wasn't brought back down to earth until Rojas stood in front of me and stopped me.

"The coaches are really liking you," he said. "You might get to start."

"Great," I replied, skating around him. Rojas followed me, the two of us skating in silence for a moment. I didn't even know if I wanted to be a starter or play hockey at all, but to keep the scholarship money I got from the athletic department, I had to.

Rojas and I worked on a few drills together before practice ended. The coaches brought us to center ice for a small meeting before they would let us back to the locker rooms.

"As you all know, we have a couple scrimmage games next week that we have been preparing for," Coach Foreman started. "These games are where some of you rookies are going to show us what you got. I'll post the lineup for the scrimmage against Brown by the end of the week. You're dismissed."

I never wanted to step foot on the Brown campus again.

I was one of the last people off the ice, following the rest of my team back to the locker room. As I was gathering my things after a quick shower, Cooper came up behind me and bumped my shoulder. My initial instinct was to punch him, but I fought of the urge and instead looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"Hey, Reilly, I didn't expect to see you out this weekend," he said. "I'm serious, you should come with us again. It'll be fun."

"I'm not really the going out type," I muttered, grabbing onto my bag.

Cooper chuckled. "That's not what it seemed like last time. Hey, who was that guy you were with when I saw you? I didn't recognize him."

"Wren." I said it automatically, without thinking about it, like it was something I felt like Cooper should already know. "He goes to Brown."

"Oh," Cooper said. "He seemed a little odd. I was wondering how you knew him."

I didn't say anything to that, but a strange feeling crept through my stomach that made me want to leave this conversation immediately. I didn't want to talk about Wren, or hear Cooper talk about how odd he found him. All I wanted was to forget about Wren and that I ever knew him at all.

I especially wanted to forget the way he looked the other morning as he undressed in front of me. I hated the way my mind and body responded to him. He had to have found some way into my brain with whatever weird powers he had and manipulated my thoughts. Because there was no way I saw a bunch of hockey players undress every day and *he* was the one who occupied my mind, the one who made me feel things that I didn't want to feel.

"But if you're friends with him or whatever, that's cool," Cooper added. He must have taken my silence as offense. I decided I would let him believe that he had offended me. Anything to stop this conversation and leave.

But Wren wasn't my friend and even the thought of that being true gave me inexplicable rage. I hated him and I never wanted to see him again. Not after what he had suggested, not after the way I had reacted to seeing his body. I needed to steer clear of him and forget about him and the way he made me feel.

There was only one way I knew how to do that, so that was how I ended up at the bar that night with Cooper and some other guys from the team. They said they were only going for a bite to eat and a few drinks, but I was there for something else entirely. I needed to get drunk.

I needed to get drunk and forget about how Wren made me feel things that I tried so hard to suppress. He was my biggest problem and the worst part was that he *wanted* to tempt me. He wanted me to forget about whatever boundaries I had made for myself even if doing that would make me hate myself even more.

The drinking didn't help because all I could see was his stupid face, his stupid body. Every time I tried to think of something else, there he was. He had ruined me, and he would undoubtedly be extremely please with himself to find out that he had. It would make him feel more superior than he already did.

And with the drinking came even more anger and emotion. It didn't work to numb me and make me feel nothing, forget everything that troubled me. It made everything worse, and that was how I ended up walking out of the bar without any of my teammates knowing. My body was on autopilot just as it had been during hockey practice. I stomped down the sidewalk, crossing the street without even looking for cars. My hands were in fists at my sides as I walked down a brick pathway and ended up at one of Brown University's dorm buildings, the only one I had ever been to.

I entered the building as someone was leaving and took the stairs two at a time up to Wren's room. Then I pounded on the door so hard that I could barely stop myself from hitting Wren as he opened it.

"Well, isn't this a nice surprise," Wren said, leaning against the door frame.

I shoved him back with my hand on his chest and walked into his room, slamming the door behind me. His expression was playful and unserious like it was often times around me. It was the look he had whenever he was amused with me and making fun of me in his head.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" he asked with a grin.

"Shut the fuck up!" I snapped, my hands pulling at my hair. "You fucking ruined me!"

Wren's smile dropped slightly as I continued pulling at my hair. I was breathing heavily, could feel my face getting hot, yet I still wanted to scream at him. Me and my drunken state wanted him to feel my anger.

"You don't get it, you just don't get it!" I yelled, starting to pace his room. "I'm not supposed to be like this! I'm not! I'm supposed to be normal."

"Is this all because I asked you to have sex with me?" Wren asked. "It was an offer, Lance. No one said you had to do it. You don't have to get all worked up about it."

" *Shut up!* " I screamed. "Don't say that again! I can't be like this. I'm not like this. It's you and the stupid things you say that are messing with my head."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Wren replied. "Why don't you sit and calm down, alright? Before you have a panic attack or something. I do not want to deal with that."

I was still pulling at my hair, but I couldn't feel the pain. My vision was blurring and I was seeing red. I didn't know how to get my anger out or what to do with all these emotions, with all this self hatred. Sometimes I wished I could have been born into a different world, or not born at all.

" *Landon,"* Wren said, taking my hands in his to pull them from my hair.

I stared at him for a moment, my breathing slowing, before ripping my hands from his grasp and putting distance between us.

"Don't fucking touch me!"

Wren stared at me with a bored expression. He turned and picked up his keys, sliding them into his pocket before nodding toward the door.

"Come on. Let's go," he said, moving toward the door.

"No, I need to tell you..." I trailed, one of my hands moving to pull at my hair. "I need to tell you how fucked up you are!"

"You can tell me in the car," he said. "Let's go for a drive."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Well, *I'm* going, so are you going to come with me or stay here and scream at the walls?"

He looked smug as I followed him toward the door and out of his building. My mind was clouded and I barely understood exactly what I was doing when I got into the passenger's seat of Wren's car. He had an audio book playing, but I couldn't focus on what it was saying. My mind was in a fog, my head felt heavy even as I leaned it against the cool window, and my anger was dissipating just because I felt so *tired.*

I still wanted Wren to know I was angry, and I wanted him to feel as bad as I felt, but it was like nothing could bother him. He didn't care what I thought of him and he didn't care how he made me feel.

"Where are we going?" I mumbled, my voice quiet and slurred. But Wren still somehow understood me.

"Anywhere, nowhere," he replied. I hated the vague way he spoke and how he looked so at ease while I was crumbling in the passenger's seat.

"You're fucked up," I said.

"What?"

"I said you're fucked up," I repeated, louder this time. "You want me to feel like this. You like messing with my head and you know exactly how to do it."

He was silent for a moment. We were passing through the night like phantoms. There was no one around to see or hear us. It was like we entered another dimension where it was just us.

"Lance, I think you're a lot more angry at yourself than you are at me," Wren finally replied.

It was possible for me to be angry at the both of us, at him for being the way that he was, and at myself for letting him get to me and being unable to suppress the part of me that desired him.

The part of me that desired any man was something I had been long suppressing and I couldn't slip up now, not for Wren of all people. That would only make me hate myself more.

"You know, this whole taking care of you while you're drunk thing is getting old," Wren said after we sat in silence for a few moments, the audio book playing in the background forgotten.

"You're not takin' care of me," I slurred.

"Only I am actually," he continued. "And this isn't me. I don't do this sort of thing."

"Then why are you?" I snapped.

Wren didn't say anything. He pursed his lips and looked at me briefly before turning his attention back to the road.

We sat in silence again and I closed my eyes as I leaned my head against the cool window. Wren stopped through a drive through for food, but I paid him no attention until he stopped the car.

I opened my eyes and saw that we were parked in front of the ocean. The beach was deserted this time of year and this time of night. The moon

reflected over the rippling water and the sky was so clear it was like we could see every star in existence.

Wren sat beside me, eating french fries. He noticed me looking at him and motioned downward toward the cupholder which held another carton of fries.

"I can't eat those," I said.

Wren stuffed a fry into his mouth. "Why?"

"Because they're not healthy."

The strict diet my father used to make me follow never allowed for fried foods. There were times I would sneak some with the hope of him never finding out, but he almost always did.

Even now, living on my own at school, I found it hard to stray too far from that diet even with the temptation of the food at the dining halls.

"But they're good," Wren said. "Try one." He held out a fry in front of my face, bringing it closer until it touched my lips.

I smacked his hand away and he chuckled, popping the fry in his mouth.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I spat.

Wren just shrugged then spent the next few minutes glancing over at me and looking away. Eventually, I had enough and snapped at him again.

"Why the fuck do you keep looking at me? Just say something if you have something to say!"

"You'll just get more angry if I say what I'm thinking," he replied.

"Just say it."

He paused and put his carton of fries down in the cupholder before turning his body to face me completely.

"You always resort to anger to deal with any emotion you're feeling," Wren started. "If you're feeling sad or insecure, you turn that into anger. And right now, instead of dealing with your emotions, you chose someone or something to be angry at. That being me."

"This has nothing to do with how I'm feeling. *You* make me angry," I told him. Wren grinned and I hated how my eyes focused on the way his lips moved to form it.

"And why do I make you so angry?" he asked. "Is it because you just don't like me? Am I irritating? Would that cause such a visceral reaction from you?"

I didn't respond, so he just kept going.

"Or is it because things about yourself? So you have to find someone else to blame and I'm right here?"

I looked away from him, staring out at the ocean. My vision started to blur and it took me a moment to realize tears were forming in my eyes. I didn't want him to see me like this, but there was nowhere for me to go. All I could do was sit there in his car beside him while my emotions got the better of me.

I figured he would make a comment or say something to make me feel even worse, but he said nothing. I felt the heat of Wren's gaze, but I couldn't face him.

"Have some fries," Wren said after a few moments, picking up the carton and handing it to me. So I did. And that was the last thing he said for a while.

I didn't know how long the two of us sat in that silence, the only sound being the faint voice on the car speakers and the crashing of the waves before us.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter.

12

Wren Ridley

I always liked the beach at night. It was peaceful. There were no people around to ruin the serenity. When life got too much, or people got too annoying, this was a perfect getaway. And sharing this was not something I had ever planned on doing.

But of course for some fucked up reason I couldn't just leave Landon alone. And of course he had to come to me with his self loathing.

I knew as soon as I smelled the alcohol on his breath how this night would end, with me taking care of him because he drank his emotions. What I didn't expect was the severity of his emotions or the gut-punch feeling as he was close to a mental breakdown in my dorm room and as cried beside me in the car.

There was something more going on with Landon than I had originally thought, something that seriously ate at him, a self hatred that had been instilled in him.

And a feeling gnawed at me. A feeling of sympathy or guilt, I couldn't tell, but I'd never admit to it.

Landon let out a shaky sigh and I kept my eyes facing forward. I didn't want to look at him as he cried, and he wouldn't want me to either.

"I'm so tired," he said in barely a whisper.

"Go to sleep then," I replied, though I knew that wasn't what he meant. He was tired of everything, not just physically tired, but emotionally drained.

We had both finished our fries and were now just sitting and staring at the water, my book playing in the background to fill the silence, but I hadn't been paying attention to it.

Landon did fall asleep eventually. When his breathing evened out, I looked over at him to see that his eyes were closed and his face had softened. When he was asleep he looked at peace. He looked so much younger without the lines of anger on his face and it reminded me that he and I were only a year apart. He was only eighteen and burdened by all that anger.

I forced myself to look away from him, uncomfortable with the way I was starting to pity him and feel guilty that I had contributed to the anger that plagued him tonight.

I didn't know why I cared. I knew I shouldn't. He was not someone who deserved my sympathy that I rarely ever gave out. Not after the way he had treated my brother.

That was why I had to look away from him because if I kept looking at him, I would forget that. I would see his face looking so innocent and forget that damaged his anger had caused.

It was one thing to be physically attracted to him, it was a whole other to start feeling anything other than that.

Landon had been asleep for a while before I started driving back to the city. I put my audiobook back to the last part I remembered and listened the whole way to Landon's campus.

He stirred awake just before we made it back, but he didn't say anything. When I parked the car outside his building, Landon didn't move for a moment. I wondered if he was going to start screaming at me again, or start crying.

But he just looked at me and gave me a slight nod before getting out of the car and going into his building. I watched as he walked inside and walked into the stairwell before I drove off.

I tried to keep my mind off of him while I drove back to my dorm building. I didn't want to think about the way he cried or the way some strange part of me wanted to comfort him but had no idea how.

I should have just kicked him out of my room. Then I wouldn't be thinking about him at all and all would be right in my world. But there was this strange pull that made that impossible.

When I got back to the room, I was surprised to find that James was awake. He had the lights off, sitting up shirtless on his bed and watching something on his laptop. He glanced at me with raised eyebrows when I walked in and shut the door behind me before dropping my keys on my desk.

"And where have you been all night?" James asked in a teasing tone, pausing whatever it was on his computer.

"Just went for a drive," I told him, slipping my shoes off and pushing them under my bed.

The two of us stared at each other for a few moments and James started grinning, shutting his laptop and pushing it off his legs.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" he asked, amused.

"I'm not staring at you any sort of way."

"Only you are," he said."You're giving me *the eyes.* Are you sexually frustrated or something? Haven't gotten any in a while?"

I rolled my eyes at him. "You're ruining your chances at getting anything I was thinking of offering you."

" *No* ," he said, standing from the bed."I promise I'll shut up. I'm not trying to lose one of the very few opportunities you're giving me."

The more rational part of my brain knew that hooking up with James at that moment wasn't going to solve anything. It wasn't going to take away all my thoughts of Landon, physical and emotional ones. But it would give me a moment away from those thoughts. It would let me forget momentarily and let me relax, so I motioned for James to come closer and he obliged.

A moment later, James had his lips on mine. I pulled him closer with my hand on the back of his neck and opened my mouth for him to deepen the

kiss.

This sort of thing was easy with James at this stage in our friendship. We each knew what the other liked and we both knew neither of us would catch feelings. It was the perfect scenario for two guys who only wanted sex with nothing else involved. I knew that was why James wanted it with me so often, because too many of the others, guys and girls and anyone else alike, got too attached, and he didn't have to worry about that with me. It was a relief, easy, and less complicated.

James walked me backwards, his hands on my hips as we backed into my bed. He laid me down and pulled his lips from mine to start kissing up my neck and jaw.

"Before you yell at me, I'm not going to leave a mark," he said, breathing against my skin.

"That's what you said last time too," I told him. "Get off my neck."

James obliged and brought his lips back to mine. He put his hands beneath my shirt, moving it up until we pulled it off.

***

I was too busy writing to notice Landon walk into the coffee shop the next morning. My eyes were zeroed in on my screen, my fingers furiously moving over my keyboard.

I only slept for about four hours after hooking up with James, and it wasn't a good sleep. He had fallen asleep in my bed and spent the whole night snoring in my ear. I was waking up every so often until eventually the sun started rising and I made my way to the coffee shop without James even stirring once.

The coffee shop had been open for a couple hours by now and I had already finished my second latte of the morning. I hadn't noticed someone sat across from me until a brand new latte was pushed in my line of vision. I glanced

over my laptop to find Landon glaring at me. I looked down at the latte then back up at him and grinned.

"You didn't punch me last night," I told him.

"I know," he said, his voice low. "My anger still got the better of me."

I didn't comment on that. I could point out that although reconciling with apology drinks was one of his anger management tactics, it didn't make him feel any better. But I wasn't looking to set him off again after last night.

Landon looked rough this morning, though it didn't make him any less handsome. I could tell he was hungover by the way he was squinting and the paleness that had taken over his face.

"If you're going to buy me a drink every time you get angry at me, you'll go broke fast," I said, taking a sip of the latte. He set his lips in a firm line, not bothering to respond to what I said.

"This is the last time I'm going to see you," Landon said after a moment.

"I highly doubt that, Lance."

He glared at me. "I'm serious. I can't stand you. I don't know why I went to you last night, but it will never happen again."

I thought for a moment, setting my drink down on the table.

"Maybe you should quit drinking," I told him, raising my eyebrows. "You told me last night the fries were unhealthy. You think alcohol is any better?"

"I don't need your advice."

"I think you do," I said.

Landon let out a sigh and the two of us sat in silence, staring at each other for a few moments. I sipped on my latte while Landon's hand was clenched around his cold brew cup.

"Anthony," I called out, glancing over to where Anthony stood at the counter. "Can you bring us a couple croissants?"

"I'm not a waiter, Wren," he responded with a deadpanned expression.

"I'll give you a nice tip."

Anthony huffed in annoyance but moved to get the croissants anyway.

"What are you doing?" Landon asked, visibly annoyed.

"Do you have trouble hearing now?"

Landon's scowl deepened as Anthony brought over the baked goods and put them down in front of us.

"Anything else I can get you?" Anthony asked in a sarcastic tone. "I charge by the second."

I handed him a twenty dollar bill. "Keep the change as a tip, my favorite barista."

He yanked the money out of my hand and walked away.

I picked up one of the croissants and took a bite while Landon continued staring at me. I gestured toward the other one on the table for him to take. He looked down at it briefly, then back at me.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

Because even being in your presence sends a pang through my chest. Because for some reason you've gotten into my head and I can't get you out.

"Doing what?" I questioned, taking another bite. "Being nice? I'm just a nice guy."

"You're not. You just like to make everything weird."

I shrugged. "Maybe. Just eat the croissant."

"No."

"Lance..."

"No."

"I can't eat both. I'm trying to watch my figure."

"Your figure is fine." Landon's eyes widened as soon as the words left his mouth and I couldn't hold back the laugh that escaped me.

"Don't worry, so is yours," I said, loving the way Landon's cheeks turned slightly pink in embarrassment.

He shook his head then surprised me by actually picking up the croissant and taking a bite. Landon didn't say anything about it, the only indication that he liked it being that he continued taking bites from it.

I started typing again on my computer while Landon finished off his croissant, then started sipping on his cold brew. Eventually, his staring became too much and I had to confront him about it.

"I thought you never wanted to see me again?" I asked. "Yet you're still here."

"I'm just waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"Waiting for you to say something about last night," Landon answered. "Waiting for you to make some dumb comment to embarrass me about it."

"You *want* me to make you angry?"

"No, I just expect you to."

I would like to believe that I could say something horrible to Landon about what had happened last night to make him so angry and upset that he would storm out of here and never see me again, but I couldn't. Not only did I get a

squeezing feeling in my chest at the thought of how upset he was the night before, but I didn't want to make him upset. Usually I didn't care, but he had slithered his way past my defenses and actually made me care.

"Well, I did already say that you should stop drinking," I said after a moment.

"You never drink?" He looked at me in disbelief, sipping on his cold brew with his eyebrows raised.

"No. Not since high school," I replied. "And I definitely never did it to suppress my emotions."

Landon scoffed. " I don't think you have emotions."

I just shrugged and took a sip of my latte.

After a little while longer, Landon finished his cold brew and stood up from the table.

"Well, thanks for not being a total dick I guess," he muttered, looking away from me as he said it.

"Will I still never be seeing you again?" I asked in a teasing tone, grinning over the rim of my cup.

Landon rolled his eyes. "Maybe."

With that, he tossed his cup in the trash and left the coffee shop. I didn't even have enough time to go back to my draft before Anthony was marching over to my table and taking the vacant seat across from me.

"Aren't you supposed to be working?" I asked him.

"Shut up," he said. "What the hell is wrong with you? I've never seen you look like that!"

"Hm?" I hummed. "Like what?"

"You're into him," Anthony replied. "Like actually into him. I never thought I'd see the day you were actually interested in someone."

I looked at him plainly, feigning confusion.

"Now, that is absurd," I said.

"No, it's not."

"Anthony, I think you're just confused," I said. "Lance and I don't really get along."

"I know his name is Landon by the way," Anthony said with irritation prevalent in his tone. "And this isn't the first time you've met up with him here."

"We run into each other."

Anthony sighed. "Is it that hard for you to admit."

"I don't understand what I'm meant to be admitting," I told him. "You're talking nonsense."

"You're into him."

"Like you're still into James?" I said with a smile. Anthony frowned at me while I shot him an expression of innocence. "Just as I thought."

"You're an asshole," Anthony muttered, standing up from the seat.

"What? I thought we were bantering?"

Anthony walked by and slammed my laptop shut as he did, shooting me a glare.

"I'm putting coffee grounds in your latte tomorrow," he said, going back toward the counter.

I shook my head. "Well, now you ruined the surprise. You can't tell me exactly how you're going to trick me."

Anthony flipped me off from his place at the counter and I opened my laptop back up, continuing to work on my draft and putting all thoughts of Landon to the back of my mind.

**

Thanks for reading!!!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter. Wren povs take a lot of out me lol

13

Landon Reilly

There was an icy wind tonight. On an early October night, it was colder than expected. I scowled at the sky as my hair blew into my face. It felt like I was being pushed along the path back to my dorm room, away from the dining hall where I just had a late dinner.

The dining hall was quiet this time of night on a Friday because all the students were too busy being out and getting drunk, which was something I wanted to put behind me after I proved to have bad decision making skills while under the influence. Part of me hated taking Wren's advice, but it was the drinking that led me to him in the first place.

I hadn't seen him all week, steering clear of the Brown campus and my usual running route that leads to the coffee shop he frequents, despite the fact that I was really starting to enjoy their coffee.

And instead of going out and getting drunk at the bar with my teammates, where I would inevitably run into Wren, I stayed in my dorm before having a late night dinner. It was better this way.

But the wind on my walk back to my dorm was making me rethink leaving the warmth of my bed at all this evening. That, and the fact that there were groups of drunk college students every so often stumbling down the walkways as I went.

Now my face was cold, my hair a mess, and my annoyance was elevated as I walked by a group of three girls loudly slurring their words as they walked through campus.

I hurried away from them, stuffing my hands in my pockets to protect my hands from the cold.

I was almost back to my building when I heard someone call out my last name, obviously drunk out of their minds.

"Oh... hey Reilly!" Cooper called out. I ignored him, hoping in his drunken state he wouldn't be able to catch up to me. "Reilly!"

Unfortunately, he did catch up to me, and he latched his hand to my shoulder to pull me to a stop. He wasn't drunk enough that he couldn't hold himself up, but his eyes were glossy and his speech was slurring. He had one of those dopey smiles on his face as he stared at me.

"Reilly, hey..." Cooper said again, keeping his tight grip on my shoulder. "Why didn't you.. didn't you go to Rojas's party?"

"Busy," I grumbled, starting to walk away.

Cooper followed me and stopped us when we were up against the side of my dorm building.

"I was hoping to see you there," Cooper slurred, pressing on my shoulder so that it was against the building.

"I don't do parties."

"Aw, c'mon," Cooper replied with a laugh. "Parties are fun. Rojas throws good parties."

I just shook my head at him and looked around. There was no one in sight and the doors to my building were around the corner. I didn't know who Cooper was with or where he came from, or if he had just been wandering around by himself. But I knew I didn't like being this close to him and I didn't want to be there at all.

"I wanted you there because I..." Cooper trailed. "There's more places to get some privacy and I wanted to... experm? Expermend? Exper..."

My jaw clenched as I put the pieces together to what he was getting at.

"Experiment!" he said with a grin. "That's the word. I wanted to experiment because I heard about you."

I shook my head and started backing away from him before I did something I really regretted like punching him repeatedly in the face until all his teeth fell out. Because if he kept talking, he would send me into a blind rage and I didn't know if I'd be able to stop myself.

Cooper followed me as I walked backwards. Then, before I could even register what was happening, he grabbed my face and planted his lips on mine in a sloppy, open-mouthed kiss.

I stood there in shock for a moment as Cooper moved his lips over my still ones before I grabbed his shoulders and shoved him back so hard that he fell to the ground with a groan.

My breaths were heaving and I looked down at him in disgust before turning around and storming away. I barely registered anything as I walked into my building, bypassing the RA that sat at the entrance checking people in. Muscle memory is what brought me back to my dorm room.

I opened the door to the room and slammed it shut behind me, leaning back against it with my eyes closed and taking deep breaths to soothe my anger.

"Are you okay...?" Kyle asked, startling me. My eyes shot open to see him sitting on his bed, which had been empty when I left earlier.

I worked to slow my breathing as I nodded at him. Kyle looked at me with disbelief, clearly knowing something was wrong with me.

"You're breathing like you ran two miles just to get here," he pointed out, raising his eyebrows.

"I'm fine," I told him, stepping away from the door and grabbing my towel from my closet.

I didn't say another word to Kyle as I left the bedroom for a streaming shower.

My breathing was still heavy, but it slowed some as I stood under the hot water. I scrubbed my face with my hands, willing myself to keep the tears forming in my eyes from falling.

I didn't need to fucking cry over this shit.

I didn't know if it was fear or disgust or anger that made my heart keep pounding at the thought of what had just happened. But the scene kept playing over in my head. I still felt Coopers hands gripping my face and his mouth moving messily over mine.

I spit into the drain, hoping to get the taste of him out of my mouth. But I couldn't even tell if that taste was something my mind made up to disgust me even more.

Kyle stared at me when I walked back into the room, but I paid him no mind. I could dressed from behind the closet door to block his view of me before getting into bed.

***

Monday night's practice was even more uncomfortable than I imagined it would be. Cooper kept stealing glances at me, obviously aware of what he had done to me Friday night.

I had successfully avoided him in class and I would continue to avoid him at hockey for the rest of the season even though I could feel his stare like it was physically touching me, could feel his rough grip on my face, could feel how he put his mouth on me.

I had been in a fog when Rojas came over to me and clapped me on the shoulder.

"What's got you so distracted?" he asked me.

It was then that I had realized the ice was empty except for the two of us, practice having ended without me even knowing.

"Did you even hear Coach say you're starting for the scrimmage against Brown on Friday?"

I shook my head. "No, I didn't hear."

It wasn't surprising to me though. The underclassmen would likely all get a chance to start in games before the actual season started and the roster was solidified.

I skated toward the bench, Rojas following behind me. Most of the guys were already in the showers by the time we got into the locker room. I'd rather die than get naked and shower in the same place as Cooper.

Before I could make my escape, I noticed Cooper in the corner of the room with his friends. I could feel his stare, and when I made brief eye contact with him, he and his friends all looked at me and whispered.

"Are they giving you shit?" Rojas asked, not bothering to keep his voice low. Cooper and his friends immediately looked away.

I glared at him and picked my things up, leaving the locker room before he could say anything else.

***

Wren Ridley

There was a reason I rarely ever went to my own brother's hockey games. Several actually. It was cold, there were too many people packed in there, and it was boring.

So when Stella all but begged for James and I to go to Brown's first scrimmage, my immediate answer was no.

She only wanted us to go because she knew Jess would be there, and instead of just asking to go with her like a normal person, she wanted to casually bump into her and act like she didn't know she was going to be there.

"This shit is so boring," James complained, leaning back in his seat on the other side of Stella.

She glared at him. "It hasn't even started yet."

"Then they need to hurry up," he said with a yawn. "Is Jess even here or are we here for no reason?"

"She'll be here."

"And why couldn't you just come with her?" James asked.

"Because she needs us as an excuse to be here so Jess thinks they're just running into each other by accident," I filled in for him.

"You play too many games Stells," James said. "Almost as many as Wren."

Stella flipped him off and directed her attention to the ice.

Both teams had taken to the ice for warm ups and I had kept my gaze away from them, despite the urge to search for Landon among them.

I hadn't seen him since last week at the coffee shop, and I was kicking myself for letting that bother me. I should've been happy to have him out of my life, but instead I felt strange, an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach taking over me at the thought of never seeing him.

It was disgusting. It was wrong. But part of me didn't care.

Eventually, my eyes did land on Landon. He was standing to the side of the net and shooting pucks into it. He looked focused and poised.

"Oh, fuck me," James groaned, curling up in his seat and hiding his face behind his hand.

"What's wrong with you?" Stella asked him.

I tore my gaze from Landon and looked around, grinning as I saw the reason for James's outburst.

"Something's telling me it's because Anthony is right over there," I said, nodding toward where Anthony sat with his friends.

"Oh, no, why would you think that?" James sarcastically replied.

"Hello my favorite barista!" I called out, causing Anthony to turn around.

He glanced at me and Stella, then to James with an unreadable expression, before giving a slight wave to Stella and me and turning back around in his seat.

"I hate you so much," James hissed.

"What? I was just saying hi to the guy who makes my amazing lattes every morning."

"Oh my God!" Stella exclaimed, throwing out her arms to grab onto James and me. "Jess is over there. I'm going to go walk around and see if she sees me."

With that, she stood up and left us.

"We could just leave," James suggested.

"No, I think I'd like to stay," I replied, causing James to shoot daggers at me with his eyes.

"You're an asshole," he grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest.

I just grinned at him, and the game started a few moments later.

I wasn't a fan of hockey, but I noticed everything Landon did on the ice. The way his feet moved faster than everyone else's, the shots he took being harder and more precise than players on both sides. And the way he shook his head when he took a shot that was stopped, looking like he was cursing under his breath.

And when he scored, he barely even celebrated, just nodded a couple times while his teammates embraced him.

Brown ended up losing the game to Providence college three to one, not that it matter much to me. Or at all.

Stella had sat down with Jess after bumping into her and the two animatedly spoke through the entire game while James sat on his phone and I watched Landon like my eyes were glued to him.

James and I met Stella outside where she stood with Jess and her friends apparently waiting for their hockey friends to exit the building.

"Can we go now, Stells?" James impatiently asked.

"Just wait a sec, J," she said, not looking away from Jess.

I sighed and leaned back against the building, crossing my arms over my chest.

"So, we were planning on going to this gay club after the game," Stella told Jess.

"We were?" I interjected.

"And you can come with if you want," Stella finished, ignoring me.

"You sure you don't mind?" Jess shyly asked, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"No! You should definitely come!" Stella assured her, reaching out and grabbing her hand. "Oh, Landon! You should come too!"

My eyes snapped over toward the door where Landon had just walked out of, his hockey bag slung over his shoulder. His hair was damp from having just showered, the ends of it sticking to his forehead.

"What?" Landon asked, glancing at me briefly before looking back at Stella.

"Come out with us tonight," she said. "We're going somewhere different."

Landon opened his mouth to respond, but was interrupted when one of his teammates called his name.

"Reilly," the guy called out.

Landon walked over to Jess and Stella, ignoring his teammate.

"Sure, let's go. Can we go now?" he asked.

The girls didn't think anything of his reply before starting to lead him to my car. Landon followed behind them and I quickly caught up to him.

"What happened to never seeing me again?" I asked.

"Shut up," he said, not even looking at me.

"You seem to be in a rush to get out of here."

He glared at me. "Can you not be an asshole for one night?"

"Not sure. I've never tried."

Landon only responded by shaking his head.

When we got to my car, I took his bag and threw it in my trunk while Jess, Stella, and James got into the back seat.

"Do you even know where we're going?" I asked Landon, the two of us bring the only ones still outside.

"It doesn't matter," he said, opening the passenger door and getting inside.

I was sure his attitude would change once we arrived. I grinned at the thought and got in the car.

**

Thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter !

14

Wren Ridley

The look on Landon's face when we pulled into the parking lot was priceless. His face flushed and his eyes widened slightly while he clenched his jaw when he realized exactly where we were. The colorful signs and the people walking into the club gave it away.

I was tempted to take a picture of him and hold it against him forever.

"You still sure it was a good idea to come with us?" I asked him.

He just glared at me.

"You guys go ahead," I said, turning toward the back seat.

"You're not coming?" Stella asked.

"We'll meet you inside," I told her. Maybe. If Landon would get out of the car.

Stella, Jess, and James got out of the car and made their way inside. Landon and I stayed put. It wasn't until the others disappeared from sight that I started speaking.

"I just want to make it clear you know where we are," I started, turning to face him. "Since you don't have the best track record when interacting with other queer people."

"I did this to myself," he muttered, running a hand through his now dry hair.

"Yeah, you did," I agreed. "But if you can't handle it, you shouldn't go in. This is a safe place for them, and if you're going to blow up if a guy even looks at you, then you just shouldn't go in at all."

I would admit only to myself that I had a soft spot for this place and the people who went here. I spent some time here while still coming to terms with my own sexuality.

Landon stared at me for a moment and then looked back at the building. His eyes landed on a couple walking inside, holding hands.

"But if you actually want to try to not hate yourself for one night, then you should come inside," I continued. "Just so you know, they do card here, but on the bright side if you're hot enough people will just buy you drinks."

Landon rolled his eyes and looked back at me.

"Let's just go in," he muttered, opening the door and stepping out of the car. I followed after him, locking the car after we closed the doors.

Landon was tense and silent as we walked through the parking lot, but I chose to keep my observations about him to myself. I didn't need him punching me before we even walked through the doors.

We got in and found a high top table near the bar. Stella and Jess were out on the dance floor while James was already up against the wall making over with some guy.

"He works fast," Landon said, glancing over at James.

"He's over confident, some people like that," I told him, sitting across from him.

I watched as Landon looked around the room. This was undoubtedly the most queer people he had ever seen in one place, which I guess would be overwhelming for someone who had enough internalized homophobia for everyone in the room. But he didn't say anything, didn't have a look of disgust on his face, just sat and watched.

I looked over at the bar and saw the bartender, Mara, who had coincidentally been the bartender the first night I came here. They had

apparently been working here since the place opened up almost ten years ago, though they looked much younger than they were if that was the case.

"Hi Mara," I called out. "Can we get a couple of waters?"

"You got it," they replied.

Mara brought the waters over and Landon nodded at them in thanks before they walked away.

"The bartender uses they/them pronouns," I told him. "Pronouns are—"

"I know what pronouns are," he cut me off.

"Do you? What are yours?"

His eyes turned to slits. "I'm a guy."

I snorted and shook my head at him.

"I'll just refer to you as guy then," I retorted.

"You know what I mean."

"Do I?"

Landon's gaze seemed to get even harsher as he stared at me. His eyes were a dark, forest-like green that held so much behind them. They seemed like an actual forest, deep and dark, easy to lose your way in if you didn't know your way around. I was worried if I looked in his eyes for too long, I'd get trapped in them and never find my way out. This thought was new and strange and I hated it, but still I felt like I couldn't look away.

"Sometimes I think you are purposely obtuse," I told him, taking a sip of my water and quickly taking my eyes off his.

"You use words like obtuse and wonder why people find you odd."

I laughed, shaking my head. "I've never wondered, or cared, why people find me odd."

He stared at me for a moment, then looked down at the table and nodded.

"People aren't really my thing," I added. "I don't really care what they think of me."

"That makes one of us," Landon muttered.

I was surprised he would say something like that without being under the influence of alcohol, but I didn't let my surprise show. Landon wasn't really as much of an open book to me as I made him think he was, and I wasn't going to pass up the opportunity of him letting me in.

He took a sip of his water and looked around the room. His expression was blank, but I swore I saw some interest there as he watched the strangers dancing around the room, the variety of people that were before us and looking like they were living their lives to the fullest.

"I'm surprised you've stayed here this long," I told him, causing him to turn his gaze to me. "Considering how many queer people are around."

He scoffed. "I have nothing against queer people."

"Anymore," I added.

He rolled his eyes, but didn't disagree.

"You just don't like the fact that *you're* queer," I said.

"We're not talking about this."

I grinned at him. "Don't worry. You're not the only one that's ever felt like that. Definitely not the only one in this room."

"Not talking about it."

"I used to hate myself for it too," I admitted. "Though, probably not nearly as much as you do, but I did. It took being around more people like me to really accept it and be okay with it."

Landon's expression turned to one of surprise, and I couldn't tell if it was because of what I said or because I actually said something about my own struggles to him. I didn't know why I did it. Maybe this place just brought out something in me, but I just wanted Landon to stop being so hard on himself, at least in here where he was surrounded by people who wouldn't judge him for being himself.

Neither of us had time to say anything else before Mara showed up at our table with a drink, placing it in front of Landon.

"Oh, I didn't order this," Landon told them in a polite manner.

"I know, he did," they said, pointing over at a guy at the bar. "For you. Don't worry, I made the drink and brought it right over so there's nothing in it."

"Oh," Landon said, his cheeks turning pink as he glanced over at the guy Mara had pointed out.

The guy was glancing over at us now, grinning at Landon who just gave him a nod and turned back to me.

"Enjoy!" Mara said before going back to the bar.

I kept my eyes on the guy at the bar as Mara left. He was average looking with buzzed blond hair and muscles looking like they were misplaced on him. He wore a tank top even though it was October and the autumn air was cooling down enough to wear layers. He kept his eyes on Landon as his friend talked beside him.

Landon kicked me under the table.

"Will you stop staring?" he hissed in a whisper that I could barely hear, like he was worried that guy would hear him from across the bar.

I brought my eyes to Landon's face. He still looked sheepish and embarrassed, his cheeks pink and his eyes slightly widened as the drink lay untouched in front of him.

"See, I told you if you're hot enough you wouldn't have to buy drinks," I said, causing him to look even more embarrassed.

"This isn't funny," he snapped.

"Who's laughing?"

"I'm serious," he said, his voice almost whining. "Now he's going to fucking come over here and it's going to be weird as shit!"

"I get it, you're not ready for this sort of thing," I replied, quirking the corner of my lips upward.

"No, I—"

"Luckily for you, I know how to solve this," I said. "Come over here."

He now looked less embarrassed and more confused.

"What?"

"Bring your chair over here," I said. "Sit next to me."

"No!" he snapped.

"Suit yourself," I said with a shrug.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, both of us sipping on our waters. Landon's other drink was still full, the condensation on the glass starting to slide down and form a small puddle around it on the table.

I saw Landon's eyes widen, and before I could ask him why, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I glanced up at the owner of that hand and saw another average looking guy smiling down at me. He was cute enough, someone I would potentially hook up with on any other night.

"Hi, can I buy you a drink?" he asked.

I grinned up at him, then glanced over at Landon to find he wasn't even looking at me. He was shooting daggers with his eyes at the guy standing next to me. I was so used to his glare being on me, it was strange to see it at another angle. Only this one was slightly different. It looked lethal.

"Sorry, I don't think my boyfriend would like that very much," I told him, gesturing toward Landon.

Landon instantly turned his gaze to me. He looked like he was about to strangle me right there. It was comical, really.

The guy let his hand fall from my shoulder. He looked between us with a confused expression and nodded.

"Sorry, I didn't realize," he said.

"No worries," I said. "He's not very affectionate."

The guy chuckled and waved before walking away from our table.

Landon kicked me under the table again.

"You're going to bruise me," I complained.

"What the *fuck* is your problem?" he snapped. I could help but be amused at how angry he looked at me. His anger was nowhere near the level it was that night he had come drunk to my apartment, but it was still strong and seemed like he was seconds away from punching me right here in the bar.

"I didn't want to be hit on and you're right here," I said with a shrug.

"You could have just told him to fuck off without involving me," Landon replied, his voice low.

"But this will keep him from being persistent," I said. "That's how you get people to leave you alone in these places. Look like you're here with

someone else. No one wants to go up to someone if they think they'll reject them."

Landon didn't say anything to that. A second later, the guy who bought him a drink got up from the bar and looked like he was about to make his way over to us.

"It looks like you're going to have to find some other way to reject him," I said, nodding toward the guy walking toward us.

Landon looked from him to me then quickly dragged his chair over to my side of the table. I laughed as he sat close to me without actually touching me. I grabbed his hand and held it on the table in front of us. He jerked it, trying to release my grip, but stopped when the guy from the bar walked right by our table, glancing at us briefly.

Landon stared down at our clasped hands, his mouth open slightly. He made no move to take his hand from mine. His hand was rough in mine, but it didn't feel like it didn't belong there. Landon was tense, but the longer he stared at our hands, the more he seemed to relax, like he realized nothing bad was going to happen to him here just for holding another guy's hand. That, or he was having some sort of crisis because he had never shown affection for another guy before, even if this affection was contrived.

"See how easy that was?" I asked, trying to ease some of the tension between us.

He looked up at my face, still not letting go of my hand. He pressed his lips together tightly before, keeping my gaze for a moment before speaking.

"You're never going to let me live this down," he said.

"To be honest with you, this is probably one of the least embarrassing things I have against you."

He shook his head, taking his hand away from mine and looking straight ahead to keep his eyes off me. I reached out and pulled his chair closer to mine, startling him.

"If this is going to work, we at least have to *look* like we're together," I told him.

I put my arm around the back of his chair. When he leaned back, his back rested against my arm and he looked over at me with a strange expression.

We were too busy looking at each other to realize James had come up to the table.

"Well, aren't you two getting cozy," he said with a wide grin, picking up Landon's untouched drink and taking a long sip.

"Shouldn't you be getting blown in the bathroom or something?" I asked.

He dragged a stool over from the bar and sat down across from us.

"Did that, like, an hour ago," he said. "Unless one of you are offering, then yes, I should be."

Landon scoffed at him and shot him a look of disgust.

"Don't say shit like that to him," I said. "He doesn't like it."

James rolled his eyes. "Like you've never said anything to him that he didn't like."

"That's different," I replied. "He likes when I make him mad."

Landon groaned, putting his head in his hands and resting his elbows on the table.

"I should have just let that guy keep buying me drinks," Landon muttered against his hands.

"Ooh, not a good idea unless you're willing to put out," James told him. "Because then he would expect you to let him fuck you and not even take you home and fuck you, but in a bathroom stall."

I nudged Landon with my elbow.

"James has plenty of experience with that," I said.

"I'll admit I've been fucked in that bathroom," James replied with a shrug.

"I know you have. I walked in on it at least once."

"You guys are disgusting," Landon said, sitting up and fixing a glare on me.

"And you're so sweet," I told him.

We eventually found Stella and Jess and got ready to leave.

"Next time, I'll get you on the dance floor," I said to Landon as we walked through the parking lot, Stella, Jess, and James in front of us.

He shook his head at me, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

"You don't have to admit it, but I know you didn't hate it in there," I said. "I could tell. You didn't have that look on your face."

"What look?"

"The 'I hate everything and everyone and myself' look."

He sighed. "You're so stupid."

I just grinned at him and we got in the car.

**

Thanks for reading! Please let me know what you thought of the chapter!

And what is your favorite song from Harry's House?

15

Landon Reilly

I saw him in the morning some time during the week. The sun was still in its early stages in the sky, its light shining over the trees, its brightness blinding. He was running with his earbuds in, probably listening to some audiobook with an obscure title that only he knew the meaning of.

And when he passed by me with nothing more than a glance, I tried not to let that affect me like how holding his hand affected me. The feeling of his soft hand in my rough one was something I never felt before, something I never thought I could feel.

I had convinced myself it was just confusion and another unnameable feeling. I was just confused because I had never held another man's hand before, let alone in public, and never thought I would. That action alone was plaguing me. It was something I never imagined for myself, something I never desired, yet it felt like I had been missing out on it all this time.

And for Wren it was nothing. It would be the same for him as holding James's hand or the hand of the man that hit on him that night. He didn't have my father screaming at him in his mind that he was worthless and disgusting and wrong. And he definitely never thought about it again after the fact.

So I forced myself to think of anything else other than that night. Forget about Wren and the way he wanted to push my buttons, the way he wanted to change me to be like him and his friends. Forget about the way his hand felt in mine and the way that feeling ingrained itself in me. And forget that I did that to myself, that I ran to him and his friends like I would find more comfort there than I would facing Cooper.

I threw a wrench in my new routine and avoided the coffee shop I knew Wren would be at, and instead I turned around and ran back to campus,

giving myself more time to get ready before class. If I went face to face with Wren right now, he would see right through me. He would know all my thoughts and my feelings by just looking at me and observing.

Kyle was already gone by the time I got back to the room. I quickly changed out of my clothes and checked my phone for the time and was then greeted by two text messages from Micah.

From: Micah

Hi, just checking in. Call me soon :)

Also heard your first game went well!

I sighed and debated whether or not I should give Micah a call. Part of me felt guilty for not keeping up with him after he agreed to call me less, but he was someone that could see through me too, and I didn't want to deal with that this morning. So I sent him a text instead.

To: Micah

Call you later

I got to class early and found an empty spot in the back corner of the room where hopefully no one would want to sit next to me. I had overlooked the fact that Jess was in this class, and she looked for me as soon as she got in the room, then sat down beside me. She waved and let out a "Hi" while I just nodded at her in response. Her face fell a little and she didn't say anything to me for the rest of class. That was until she caught up with me after class let out and matched my pace so that we were walking together.

"Are you okay, Landon?" she asked. She looked genuinely concerned. Her mouth was set in a frown and her eyes were widened slightly like she was trying to find some injury that wasn't there.

"Fine," I said, nodding my head at her.

She continued frowning and following me.

"Well, if you want to talk about anything, you can talk to me. We're friends, right?"

"We're not friends," I said without thinking. Jess's frown deepened and she looked just as hurt as concerned.

"Did I do something?" she asked.

I sighed, glancing down at Jess as we continued walking. I shouldn't have said anything. I should have just said okay and went on my way, but I wasn't thinking straight and now she wasn't going to let this go.

"I'm sorry if I did anything," Jess added after I didn't respond. "I guess I'll see you around."

I nodded again at Jess and she turned and walked off.

I didn't have time to dwell on Jess and whether or not I made her feel like shit and if I felt guilty about it.

The rest of the week went by pretty much the same. I avoided Jess during class, I avoided Wren in the mornings, and I avoided Cooper everywhere. I even attempted avoiding calling Micah, but he eventually blew up my phone until I had to answer just to get him to stop.

He had nothing much to say and didn't ask me much of anything either. I probably would have just hung up if he did.

The hockey team had another scrimmage which we won. Rojas kept telling me he thought I would be starting once the season officially started, but I didn't want to get my hopes up about it.

It was now Friday night and practice had just let out. I gathered my things while the rest of the team went off to the showers like I had been all week now. Only this time, I was not left alone in the locker room with an easy escape. This time, Cooper stayed behind, looked around the room to make sure we were alone, and made his way over to me.

"Reilly," he said. His voice was low and urgent like if he didn't say what he needed to say to me, there would be consequences. Maybe there would be. Who knew. But I didn't want to stay to find out.

I started to leave the locker room, but Cooper grabbed my arm to stop me. I glared at him but he didn't release me.

"The only reason I haven't beat the shit out of you is because it would get me kicked off the team," I snapped, ripping my arm out of his grasp.

"You're not going to tell anyone about... about what happened, are you?" he asked, looking stressed.

I didn't answer him.

"Because I..." Cooper trailed. "I've never done anything like that before. I don't know what came over me."

"I'm not going to tell anyone because *I* don't want anyone to know about it," I seethed. "And you're going to leave me the fuck alone from now on."

Cooper frantically nodded and I left the room without another word.

I was so angry, I wanted to punch something. I wanted to get drunk and forget, but the only place I knew I could do that was going to be filled with the hockey team in a couple of hours.

I was so mad I wasn't thinking straight. I texted Wren.

To: Wren

Are you driving home tonight

From: Wren

I wasn't planning on it. Why?

To: Wren

Never mind

From: Wren

You have me interested now.

And it just so happens I am going to be driving home tonight. Do you need a ride?

To: Wren

Do you know your the most annoying person in the world

From: Wren

Do you know that it's you're not your?

I'll pick you up in half an hour.

I didn't have the energy to argue with him, and I did actually want to leave campus for the weekend, so I gathered my things and packed a bag before Wren texted me to let me know he was outside my building.

I slowly made my way down the stairs and to Wren's car, looking around to ensure I wouldn't bump into any of my teammates.

Wren beeped the horn as soon as I walked outside as if I wouldn't recognize his car and notice it was parked right outside my building. I glared at him and scurried down the path and to the car.

He had an impatient look on his face when I opened the door and threw my things into the back. He was sitting in silence, not even an audiobook was playing through the speakers.

"What?" I snapped. Wren was just staring at me after I put my seatbelt on, the car staying put on the curb.

"Well?" he asked. "Are you going to tell me why you needed my services tonight?"

I shot him a disgusted look. "Do not call it your 'services.'"

"Is that not what it is?"

My eyes narrowed. "You know what that sounds like."

Wren grinned. "Yeah, I do."

Wren looked freshly showered. His hair was damp and pushed back on his head like he had been running his fingers through it. He smelled clean and minty.

He moved his hand down to the shifter and put the car in drive. My eyes followed his hand, observed how delicate it looked, and I remembered how that hand felt in mine. My cheeks flushed and I looked away. The last thing I needed was Wren finding out how much that had affected me. He would never let me live that down.

"So, where to?" Wren asked, finally pulling away from the curb.

"My house," I said, leaning my head against the window.

"You texted me just because you wanted to go to your house?" Wren asked, sounding as if he didn't believe me.

And I guess that wasn't the whole truth. It wasn't that I wanted to go to the Hanson's, it was that I wanted to get away from campus, away from the hockey team, away from Cooper. And Wren was my only way to get home unless I paid for an insanely expensive Uber ride that I most definitely couldn't afford.

"I was in bed, cozy, and reading when I got your text," Wren said. "I expected a little more from you."

"Well, you didn't have to do that," I snapped. "So, don't act like you're owed something from me just because you decided to drive me home because you wanted to be nosy and get some sick entertainment from the shit that goes on in my life!"

Wren was silent for a moment, like my outburst had stunned him. I glanced over at him. His lips were pressed together tightly and I couldn't tell if that was because he was holding back from saying something or for a different reason entirely. He had both hands gripping the steering wheel like he was afraid it would fall off if he let go of it.

"I don't get entertainment from it," Wren told me. "What you would call nosy, I would call naturally curious. But it's not entertaining. I'm not that sadistic."

Wren was a liar, and I knew that, but I couldn't help but feel like he was being sincere. He seemed softer at this moment, almost like he felt guilty, but I knew that couldn't be the case.

"I just need to get away from there sometimes," I admitted with a sigh. "It can be too much."

"You need to get away from your friends who aren't actually your friends?"

"I guess."

Wren and I were silent for the rest of the ride. He didn't put on any of his stupid books, though I didn't think I would mind if he did. It was just something I expected from him now.

I fought with my mind about bringing up how I saw him at the beginning of the week and the two of us didn't acknowledge each other. I didn't know why that bothered me. Wren didn't strike me as the type that would acknowledge even his own mother in public if he didn't want to. My mind was just confused with the things I had been feeling since that night at the club.

I snuck a look at him and quickly looked away before he noticed, hoping he wasn't reading my mind.

When Wren pulled up outside my house, all the lights were off and only Matthew's car was in the driveway. I didn't know Anne and Matthew wouldn't be home tonight, but at least I wouldn't have to field their

questions about why I was coming home this weekend and if everything was alright at school. They were involved parents with Micah, but they tried to give me space. However, if I kept unexpectedly showing up at their house, they would get suspicious that something was wrong.

I grabbed my bag from Wren's back seat and opened the door to get out.

"Thanks," I muttered, leaving the car without looking back.

I walked up to the house, patting my pockets for my house key. I still hadn't found it by the time I got to the door, so I started digging through my backpack. I must have been out there for at least a full two minutes before I let out a loud curse, realizing I didn't have the house key and I must have left it at school.

"Fuck!" I exclaimed again, throwing my bag down on the porch.

"Locked out?" Wren asked from behind me. I jumped at the sound of his voice, not realizing he hadn't left yet.

"Why the fuck are you still here?" I asked. I was too pissed off to deal with him.

"I was waiting for you to get inside," he said like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "But it seems like you're locked out, considering you sat out here for five minutes looking through your things and you're *still* not in the house."

"Okay, I'm locked out," I said, testing the windows closest to me to see if any were unlocked. "You can go now. I'll find a way in."

"Or you could just stay the night at my place," Wren offered like it was the most simple solution.

"Yeah, that's not happening," I replied, going down the porch steps. Wren followed me down as I rounded the house, testing all the ground floor windows.

"It's not like you haven't stayed with me before," he said. "And you're definitely not going to find an open window."

"I stayed with you when I was drunk and couldn't even walk on my own," I said, pulling at another window. "That's different. I'm not willingly staying with you."

We were at the back of the house now. I stood with my hands on my hips, looking up at the bedroom windows.

"But I thought we were boyfriends?" Wren said with a snarky grin.

My head snapped toward him and I shot him a glare. My heart pounded and I didn't know why. It was like every time I looked at him, I remembered holding his hand in that club, how it felt, not being afraid of anyone seeing. But that was the club, that was the only place I would ever feel like that. And my mind was messed up thinking it had anything to do with whose hand I was holding. But I looked at him and it felt like it had everything to do with whose hand it was.

"Shut the fuck up and go away," I said after a stunned moment, shaking my head to rid my thoughts of Wren.

I moved toward the house, trying to figure out a way I could climb up to one of the second floor windows. I was almost sure my bedroom window would be unlocked. It was just a matter of climbing up there.

"Please don't tell me you're thinking of climbing up the side of the house," Wren called out from behind me.

"Go away," I said again.

"Yeah, no," Wren said and suddenly he was directly behind me, so close we were nearly touching. "I'll leave, then I'll wake up tomorrow to the news of some kid dead on the ground because he fell off his house trying to break into it."

"I'll take that chance."

"You consider dying, or at least being severely injured, a better alternative to just sleeping at my house?"

"Kind of."

"And you think *I'm* the strange one?"

I ignored him, climbing onto the railing of the back porch. Wren was right behind me, looking up as I steadied myself.

"Come on, Lance, don't be stupid," he said.

"You're stupid," I told him.

I moved to try to figure out where I could climb to next, but Wren's hand around my ankle stopped me. I looked down at me and he had a stern expression I had never seen on him before.

"Seriously, get down," he said. His grip on my ankle was tight, but not to the point of hurting me.

"Stop touching me!" I didn't want the feeling of his skin on mine. It clouded my mind.

"Landon," Wren said, his grip tightening.

My name sounded so strange coming from him. It didn't even sound like my own name.

He was stern and serious, not willing to let me go until I got down. I could just kick him in the face to lose his grip, but I didn't. The two of us stared at each other until, ultimately, he won.

I sighed. " *Fine* ."

He let go of my ankle and I jumped down from the railing in front of him. His stern look was gone and he looked more like himself as I faced him.

"Now, *that* was dramatic," he said, starting down the porch steps. I watched him as he went.

Wren turned around. "Come on, Lance, let's go."

He motioned for me to follow him, and begrudgingly, I did.

**

HAPPY PRIDE MONTH EVERYONE!!!

Thanks for reading and please let me know what you thought of the chapter :)

16

Landon Reilly

I never imagined what Wren's house looked like, but if I did it would have been some house on a dead end street with a long driveway that practically put it in the middle of the woods, a suitable place for creatures like him to reside. But when he pulled into his driveway, his house was nothing like that. It was in a cul de sac neighborhood surrounded by houses that looked almost the exact same as each other. It was a normal, suburban neighborhood and absolutely nothing how I imagined the place Wren lived to be. However, that didn't make me regret coming with him any less.

"This is where you live?" I asked as he parked the car in front of the two-door garage.

"No, I'm just dropping you off here," he replied with a straight face. I rolled my eyes at him and the two of us got out of the car, Wren grabbing both of our bags from the backseat and throwing them over his shoulder.

"Are you sure it's okay for me to be here...?" I trailed, glancing nervously over at Wren as we walked up to the house.

"Fox isn't here," he said. "I would know it if he was and I wouldn't have brought you here."

That only made me feel slightly better. I wasn't ready for another confrontation with Fox anytime soon, not with the way he was giving me a death glare when I saw him at the diner a few weeks ago.

I followed Wren up to the house, him unlocking the door and letting us inside. The house was dark, seeming like no one else was here. I didn't know whether to feel more relaxed at that or more stressed at the fact that I was all alone with Wren.

He flipped on the lights and I took a look around the house. We were standing in the living room that was practically spotless except for the books stacked on the coffee table and the video games in a pile on the floor near the TV. There were a ton of pictures of the family all around the room. A family portrait hung above the fireplace and individual school pictures of all the children were scattered about the walls. I didn't realize Wren had so many siblings. I didn't actually know he had one other than Fox.

Before I had the chance to say anything, two little girls came out of nowhere, screaming, one holding a frying pan and the other a broom as if they were going to hit the two of us with them. I jumped back, but Wren looked at them with a blank expression.

"Seriously?" he asked the girls, raising his eyebrows.

"You asshole!" the one holding the broom exclaimed. She smacked him with it. "We thought someone broke in!"

"Through the front door by unlocking it with a key?"

She smacked him again with the broom and he took it out of her hands.

"You don't know what it's like being a girl and having to live in fear!" she yelled.

"Where are Mom and Dad? Where's Colt?"

"Mom and Dad are out with Dan and Mindy. Colt is upstairs, but he would be *no* help in a break-in situation."

"I don't doubt that," Wren replied.

The other little girl was glaring at me, still holding the frying pan up like she was about to use it. I recognized her from the diner a few weeks ago.

"Ava, you can put that thing down now," Wren told her, but she didn't listen.

"What is *he* doing here?" she asked him, never taking her eyes off of me.

Wren looked between the two of us and let out a sigh.

"Okay, what's it going to take to keep you two quiet about this?"

"Quiet about what?" the other girl, who I assumed was his sister, asked, placing her hands on her hips.

"About him being here, Fawn," Wren said. "What else?"

Fawn looked over at me for the first time and a look of realization washed over her.

" *Oh* , I know who this is," Fawn said with a grin at her brother. "And it's a big price because Fox would bee *so* pissed if he knew."

"So...?"

"I'll leave that up to Ava," Fawn said, looking over at her friend.

I had no idea what was going on, but I still looked over at Ava just as Wren and Fawn did. She still held her glare on me, the frying pan in her hand. That and the fact that Fawn deferred to her made me realize this must be Elijah's little sister. I knew it was a bad idea to come here.

"Come on Ava," Wren said. "Everyone has a price. What will it take for you to keep this from Elijah?"

"I don't think it's Elijah you need to worry about," Ava said, turning her glare at Wren. "He won't do anything, but Fox will rip your head off."

"I suppose you're right," he said. "But you don't want to see me get my head ripped off, do you?"

Ava rolled her eyes. "I actually don't care if you get your head ripped off."

Wren placed a hand on his chest, feigning like he was hurt.

"Ouch," he said, shaking his head. "Alright Fawn, what will it take for you to keep your mouth shut?"

Fawn grinned at her brother. "Give me your credit card and drive us to the mall."

Wren sighed then looked over at me.

"Wait here," he said, dropping out bags on the floor and leaving the room with Fawn.

That left me alone with Ava. She had lowered the frying pan and dropped her glare, but I still felt the hostility coming from her. It was nothing I didn't deserve, but it made me want to leave. I'd rather sleep outside than have to worry about this little girl
smothering me in my sleep.

"Elijah forgives you," Ava said, causing my eyes to move back to her. "He's too nice sometimes."

I had no idea how to respond to that.

I hated thinking about Elijah and everything I had done to him, the way he tried to help me even though I didn't deserve it and how if it wasn't for him, I would have been shipped off to some hell-like place and hate myself even more than I did now.

"I..." I trailed. Ava looked at me expectantly, but nothing else came out of my mouth. Wren and Fawn were back in the room before I could even think of anything, and Fawn grabbed Ava's arm to drag her away.

"Come on," Fawn said. "Wren's ordering food."

Ava followed her out of the room without giving me a second glance.

"I shouldn't be here," I said once Wren and I were alone.

Not with Elijah's little sister here. I would just be constantly reminded of Elijah and not only the ways I had hurt him, but how he gets to live his life so freely, how he has accepted himself, how he was so much happier and kinder than me.

Wren gave me a strange look.

"I'm the one that's going to have my brother try to beat me up if he finds out about this," Wren said. "I don't know why you're so nervous."

I didn't reply, so Wren just picked up our bags and moved toward the stairs. He noticed I wasn't following him and nodded toward the stairs so I would go with him.

I tried not to look around as I walked through the house. There were more pictures in the hallway upstairs between the bedroom doors. Wren brought me about halfway down the hall before he shoved open a door on the left side and walked in.

His bedroom was much like his side of his dorm room, neat and plain. One side of the room had three bookshelves with neat rows of books on them. The headboard of his bed had a couple piles of books laying there like he had them there so he would have options for what he read at night.

His bed was made perfectly with crisp folds in the sheets and comforter while his desk was a little more messy, littered with papers and sticky notes.

He tossed our bags down on the floor at the foot of his bed.

"I would offer to have you sleep in my sister's old bedroom, but my mother turned it into a yoga studio," Wren said after a moment. "So you'll have to settle for sleeping in here."

"And you'll sleep...?"

"In here," Wren said with a blank expression. "Isn't it enough I've given up my bed at school for you? You want to take my bed at home too? Though, I supposed we could just share."

I scoffed. "No. I would have just slept outside at my house if you were going to force me to share a bed with you."

There was a playful gleam in Wren's eye as he grinned at me.

"Who's forcing you?" he asked. "We would both fit. We'd both fit in my bed at school too if you gave me some room."

I didn't even have a response for that.

"Come on," he said after a moment. "Fawn made me order food and we have to go pick it up."

I followed Wren back down to his car before we made our way to pick up the food. I didn't bother asking him why he needed me to come with him because I decided I wouldn't have wanted to stay at that house with his siblings without him. Maybe he knew that. Or maybe he thought dragging me out of the house would annoy me.

It was hard to distinguish Wren's good intentions from his self-serving ones.

"So, are you going to see your sister while you're home?" Wren asked casually, making conversation as we stopped at a light.

"I don't know. It's not like I can call her and let her know I'm here."

Wren shot me a questioning look and that made me realize my mistake.

Wren had no idea about my family life or my relationship with my sister. All he knew was what he had been told by Elijah and Fox and things I probably told him while drunk and whatever other information he inferred about me.

He had no idea I had no way of contacting my sister because our parents monitored her phone and she would get in trouble if they knew she was speaking to me. Or that I feared whatever my father would do to me if he ever found out I had been speaking to and seeing Livi secretly since I moved out of their house.

"Don't ask," I said with a sigh, hoping Wren would drop the subject, but knowing he would sit there and stew about the meaning of my words, maybe finding meaning that wasn't there but probably seeing right through me.

I was surprised when Wren didn't say anything after that, but he still had that look on his face, the look where I could tell he was working through something in his head, probably trying to see into my mind.

Wren pulled into the parking lot and just as I was about to mindlessly follow him out of the car, my eyes locked on a familiar face across the parking lot. I paused, froze more like it, and stared over at the man getting out of his car.

My father. Making his way toward the same restaurant I almost just walked into.

I quickly got all the way back into Wren's car and sunk down in the seat to hide myself. Wren stood there with the driver's door open, looking down at me with a blank expression.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked, his voice sounding amused. He always seemed amused.

"Just go get the food and let's get out of here," I hissed, glancing up at him with pleading eyes.

"Okay, bossy," he said, slamming the door shut and locking the doors.

I knew he would press me about this later. It was just in his nature, and as much as he believed I was the predictable one, he was just as easy to predict. At least when it came to his behaviors toward me.

It seemed like Wren took an eternity in there. When he eventually came back, he startled me when he unlocked the car and got in.

He put the food in the backseat, then looked down at me with his eyebrows raised in an expectant expression.

"Drive!" I exclaimed.

"You need your seatbelt on."

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"What, are you going to kill us just driving through the parking lot?"

Wren shrugged. "Better safe than sorry."

I grumbled, but I sat back up in my seat anyway, keeping my head down as I pulled the seatbelt across my body and secured it.

"Happy?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied with a smug expression.

I glanced out the window and saw that my father's car was still in the parking lot, but he was not in it. That only relieved me slightly. Seeing my father had rattled me more than I thought it would. I was getting car sick for the first time in my life, my stomach turning every time the car moved.

I could feel Wren glancing at me every so often, but he didn't say anything. I cradled my stomach with my arms, closing my eyes and leaning my head against the window. Soon, I would be out if this and the nausea would stop.

As soon as we got into the house, I sat down on the couch. The girls came downstairs and took their food from Wren. I rested my head in my hand, my elbow propping me up on the arm rest. I didn't know how long Wren stood there and stared at me, but when I glanced over at him, he was standing on the other side of the couch with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Well, aren't you going to eat?" Wren asked gesturing toward the food he put down on the coffee table.

"I will literally throw up right now."

"Always so dramatic," Wren replied, shaking his head as he sat on the couch beside me. "And to think I bought you dinner and everything."

"You didn't have to do that," I told him with a hard stare.

"Maybe I should've bought you dinner before I asked you to have sex with me," Wren said.

Though hearing his words burned me and twisted my stomach into knots, I made myself keep calm. He was being playful and light-hearted. I didn't need to freak out even though seeing my father had rattled me so badly.

"That's what's supposed to come first right?" I replied. "Dinner then sex?"

Wren grinned, eyes glinting in amusement. "It's not usually how I do it, but I hear that's how some people prefer it. I usually just skip the pleasantries."

"Very classy of you."

Wren shrugged, taking a bite of his food. He rolled up his sleeves to his elbows, exposing his forearms and that vein I couldn't take my eyes off the last time I saw it. I brought my eyes to his face, his clear skin, his sharp jaw...

I snapped my eyes shut, holding onto my stomach. If my father saw me now staring at Wren and talking about having sex with him, he would have shipped me off faster than I could blink.

He was still in my head, telling me how disgusting I was, that I was a disappointment, that I needed to repent for my sin.

"I was trying to hold myself back from asking who you saw that made you hide in my car, but you're kind of forcing my hand here," Wren said after a few moments. "You actually look like you're going to throw up."

"Shut up."

"Was it an old teammate? A coach? Teacher? Parent?"

"Wren, shut the fuck up right now." I squeezed my eyes shut tighter as my arms hugged my stomach.

"Okay, moody," he said.

He didn't say anything else as he continued eating his food. I cracked open my eyes slightly when he got up from the couch. He picked up the food he

had put out in front of me and brought it into the kitchen. A moment later, he was hauling me off the couch.

"Why the fuck are you touching me?" I asked, pushing away from him.

"Because if my parents came home tonight and found some random kid sleeping on their couch, they'd be concerned and confused."

"You could have just told me to get up," I said, following him toward the stairs.

"Then that would have started a whole other argument and you'd still be on the couch," he said, leading me to his bedroom. "This way, it still started an argument but at least I got you up."

I rolled my eyes and glared at the back of his head.

When we got in his room, Wren tossed me a pillow and a blanket, the pillow hitting my face before it fell to the floor.

"For your night on the floor," he said, moving to his closet to change. I looked away as he pulled his shirt off over his head, only getting a glimpse of his bare back.

I quickly changed out of my clothes and into clothes to sleep in while Wren was turned away doing the same. When I turned back to him, he stood in just pajama pants. No shirt.

I looked down at the floor before lying down there to sleep.

"You can climb into bed with me if you decide your pride isn't worth sleeping on the floor."

Wren shut the light off and stepped over me to get into bed. He flicked on a lamp beside his bed and picked up one of the books from the top of the headboard.

I didn't know how long I lay there awake, tossing and turning. Wren had eventually shut off his lamp and put down his book and I hadn't gotten a

wink of sleep the whole time he read.

I couldn't stop thinking about seeing my father. All it did was remind me of the man he was, the things he had said and done to me all my life, the way he had completely altered the way I thought of myself and the way I would think of myself forever.

It wasn't until I started going to therapy that I realized how much emotional and mental damage my father had done to me growing up. I didn't know if I'd ever be able to accept myself for who I was, not with his voice constantly in the back of my mind telling me who I was was wrong.

"If you can't get comfortable down there, just get in bed," Wren said in a groggy voice.

I hadn't realized that I had turned over again.

I couldn't get in Wren's bed. There was no way I could get into bed with him. That would only make my fathers voice louder. It would only make me feel worse.

But my father's voice in my head made me feel so alone, and I didn't want to feel that way. And there was Wren just a few feet away, offering me a place next to him.

So, I sighed, heaved myself off the floor, and got into bed.

"I knew you couldn't resist me," Wren said, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

I shoved him lightly.

"Shut up, stupid."

I turned away from him and fell asleep.

**

Hi everyone! Sorry for the delay, I've been suuuuuper busy.

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter! Did you expect Wren to see his father?

17

Wren Ridley

This was different. The feeling of another body laying next to mine, his warmth, his breath brushing against the skin of my neck, the anticipation of him waking up and realizing that he was sleeping against me.

I had been awake for at least an hour, unmoving while Landon slept with his face buried in my neck and his body turned toward mine. Part of me thought I should get out of bed as best I could without waking up, but the other part of me, the part that won, wanted to be here in this position when he woke. I wanted to see what he would do knowing he had pressed himself against me in the night.

It was only a little while later when Landon stirred, groaning in my ear as he fought himself waking up. When he finally opened his eyes and came to his senses, I felt his breath stop for a moment. He sat up and put his head in his hands.

"What the fuck..." he said, his voice groggy and raspy from sleep.

"Good morning to you too," I said, sitting up against the headboard.

"Be quiet," he grumbled, rubbing his hands down his face.

"Why so grumpy?" I asked, grinning at the back of his head. "Did you like sleeping with me and now you don't know what to do with yourself?"

Landon turned to glare at me, but made no move to get out of bed.

"Don't say it like that," he said.

"What? That you liked sleeping with me?"

"I didn't *sleep with you* ," he said, his jaw tense. "You know how that sounds."

"And who is around to hear how it sounds?"

Landon shook his head at me, moving backward to lean against the headboard. His eyes moved up my body, lingering on my bare chest, before meeting the smirk on my face.

"You can look," I told him.

He rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest.

Landon was being calmer than I had anticipated. I had expected him to freak out, start yelling at me, maybe hit me. What I didn't expect was for him to sit in bed with me like this was something we did all the time. Like we were some couple that just woke up after a night together. How this wasn't too much for him, I didn't know, but it was too much for me.

I got out of bed, climbing over his legs. I didn't bother getting dressed as I started toward the door. Landon followed behind me. He stood close to me like he hoped my body would hide his. I knew the muscular hockey player behind me wouldn't go unnoticed, but I let him believe it would work for him.

When we got down the stairs, I heard my mother and father in the kitchen. I stopped at the bottom of the stairs, Landon still standing on the last step, and thought about what to do.

There was a chance my parents wouldn't recognize Landon. They had only really seen him when he played against Fox's team in high school, but that didn't mean they would recognize him if they saw him face to face. However, they knew him by name. They knew that he had fought with Fox before. And was Landon a common enough name that they wouldn't make the connection? Or could I get away without introducing him?

I took too long to think everything through, so the decision was practically made for me. There was a knock on the door and both my parents came out

of the kitchen to go toward the front door.

"Wren!" Mom called out with a wide smile, holding her arms out to pull me to her. Dad glanced over as he got the door, revealing Dan and Mindy on the other side.

Oh this was just fucking perfect.

I could feel Landon tense behind me, his chest pressed up against my back. Mom pulled away, her eyes drifting to Landon behind me.

"Hi!" she greeted. "Are you a friend of Wren's from school?"

"Uh..." Landon started.

"Yeah, that's exactly right, Mom," I told her with a grin.

My mother might have bought that, but Dan and Mindy wouldn't, and they were already in the house. The two of them looked past me at Landon. Mindy had that soft, motherly gaze she always had as she looked at him. I turned to look at him, having to glance up because he was still on the step. His eyes were wide and his jaw was clenched. I could feel he tension radiating off of him.

What I've learned about Landon in the time that I've known him was that he hated being confronted with his past. Facing Dan and Mindy was just a huge confrontation with who he was all those months ago. The things he did to their son, the way he hated himself for it, maybe even a realization of how opposite Elijah's parents were to his own, all rushed to him now.

Landon was frozen, so I grabbed his wrist and pulled him down from the step. Mindy walked over with a soft smile and put her hands on his shoulders.

"It's good to see you, Landon," Mindy said, squeezing his shoulders. "You look good. Have you been taking care of yourself?"

Landon nodded and hummed in agreement. I watched him. I could tell it was hard for him to maintain eye contact with her. His face was trying to

turn away, but his eyes stayed on hers.

"Good," Mindy said. She smiled over at me before releasing Landon's shoulders. Dan nodded in acknowledgement over at Landon while he was in conversation with Dad.

"Wren, sweetie, we're heading out to a brunch, but we'll be back later okay?" Mom said. "Will you be home?"

"I'll let you know," I told her. Mom nodded and kissed my cheek before the four of them left the house, leaving Landon and I standing side by side.

Landon's eyes were still wide as he stared straight ahead. His hands were clenched into fists at his sides.

"Are you going to stand there all day?" I asked him. I was just trying to get a reaction out of him, get him to stop looking like he was frozen in time. He glanced over at me and didn't say a word before following me into the kitchen.

He sat down at the table while I opened the fridge, taking out the eggs.

"Are omelettes alright with you? Is that something you'll actually eat? Healthy enough?"

"That's fine," he muttered.

I started cutting up some vegetables and getting the eggs ready to be cooked. I could feel Landon watching me as I cooked. I would briefly glance over and he wouldn't look away. His eyes were on my bare back as I stood at the stove.

I plated the omelettes once they were done and brought them over to the table. I turned around to pour us each a cup of coffee, scouring the fridge until I found the oat milk. I put some sweetener in mine, but left Landon's how it was after I poured the oat milk in.

"Can you put a fucking shirt on?" Landon snapped as I set the coffee in front of him.

I looked down at him, my lips tipping up in a smile. It was funny how he didn't even really try to be subtle with his attraction to me anymore. He knew I knew and it was useless to pretend I didn't.

"Sorry, is my chest distracting?" I asked him. "You can touch it if you want."

He scoffed. "I don't want to touch it."

"But seeing it makes me hard to resist," I teased. "You don't have to resist me, you know. You want me to give you a little kiss?"

"I don't want to be kissed," he snapped with more ferocity than I expected. My smile fell.

"Okay, I'm sensing that it's not my irresistible chest that has you all bothered," I said, sitting down across from him.

"You're insufferable," he groaned, cutting into his omelette before taking a bite. "How much cheese did you put in this?"

"The right amount," I said. "A little cheese isn't going to make you gain ten pounds of fat."

He didn't say anything and the two of us continued eating in silence. It was a few minutes later when Landon finally spoke up again.

"It was hard seeing Mindy, okay?" Landon muttered, looking down at his plate. "Last night was hard, this morning was hard. It's like I only get peace in my sleep and even that's not always the case."

"Who did you see last night?" I asked, not sure whether he would actually tell me. But he was choosing to be vulnerable, I didn't have to coax any of this out of him, so I was going to let him share with me what he wanted.

He looked up at me. He looked so tired. I felt a brief squeezing sensation in my heart.

"It was my dad," he said. "It's just... him seeing me... it just wouldn't have been a good situation. And it fucked me up more than I thought it would. Seeing him, I mean."

I thought back on last night, wondering if I saw the man that plagued Landon like this without realizing, but I couldn't imagine any face I saw last night being him.

"And Mindy this morning... God..." he paused, rubbing the heals of his hands into his eyes. "She was so kind to me when I didn't deserve it."

My stomach was twisted in knots. I didn't know why I cared so much, and maybe I should care less, but seeing him like this made me want to shield him and tell him everything would be okay. I had never been good at comforting anyone. I had no idea how to.

"It's not up to us to determine what we deserve," I told him. "No one *deserves* anything, not really." Whatever his father did to him to make him fear him, Landon didn't deserve. He didn't deserve the mental turmoil he still goes through and he didn't deserve to think that he didn't deserve kindness.

Landon took his hands away from his face and looked straight at me. I could tell he didn't believe me. He had his ideas about what he deserved and my words wouldn't change that.

"Do your parents... do they think we're... you know."

I shook my head. "They don't."

"How can you be sure?"

"They don't know I like men," I admitted. The look of surprise on his face almost made me laugh.

"What? Why?" he asked.

"I don't want them to know."

"But why?"

"Why does anyone not want their parents to know of their sexuality?"

Landon narrowed his eyes at me. "That makes no sense. Your brother is openly gay. You don't have to hide from them."

"I'm not hiding," I denied. I didn't think he could look any more annoyed with me, but then he did.

"You are," he said. "You hide behind your big words and your superiority act, but that's all it is: an act."

Somehow this conversation had turned on me and I didn't like it, so I had to shut it down.

"When did you get so wise?"

"Maybe I just learned to read you like you read me." I didn't like the sound of that at all.

"Or maybe you're just delusional," I replied, shooting him a smile that was anything but a happy one and then stabbing my omelette with my fork. "And honestly I find it quite amusing that you're accusing me of hiding when that's all you seem to do. Why were you so determined to come home this weekend? What are you hiding from at school? Why were you hiding from your father last night? Why were you hiding from me this past week?"

Landon stared at me, his mouth open slightly like I had asked him the most shocking question in the world.

"I wasn't hiding from you," he replied.

"You were. Ever since that night at the club."

I had given him space, figured I would let him deal with his emotions from that night since I knew it was so overwhelming for him, and he avoided me up until yesterday when he needed a ride home. I didn't even want to think about why that bothered me so much.

"Don't act like you weren't avoiding me too," Landon retorted. "You ran right past me one morning and didn't even look at me."

"I did look at you." I said it before I could stop myself, before my brain caught up to my mouth and realized what I was admitting. That I looked for him when I was out on my runs, that I looked at him without him noticing.

Landon was speechless at that. He gaped at me. His mouth moved like he was about to say something, but the words weren't coming to him.

He probably thought I always knew what he was thinking, and he was usually pretty easy to read, but I got nothing from him at this moment. I wished I could read his mind, know what he wanted to say but wouldn't.

"I figured you wouldn't want to see me after the club," I continued, filling the silence.

"I didn't," he said almost instantly. That was a lie. I could tell by the intense stare he was giving me. It was like he was trying so hard to appear like he was telling the truth that it seemed disingenuous. He had been thinking about me and didn't want me to know it. I didn't want him to know that I had been thinking about him either. I wanted to deny that even to myself.

Landon had squeezed his way into my mind and I had no idea how to get him out.

"It was overwhelming for you," I said, taking a sip of my coffee.

"No," he denied. "That's not it."

I quirked an eyebrow at him, my expression telling him I didn't believe what he was saying. I didn't expect him to admit it, but I knew it was overwhelming for him. He had never been in that type of environment before. It was scary for anyone their first time, especially someone like him who obviously had some religious trauma going on. He probably felt a lot of different emotions that night, conflicting ones that kept him up at night. It was no wonder he avoided me after the fact.

Before either of us could say anything else, the girls and Colt came bounding into the kitchen, glancing at our plates.

"Did you make us breakfast?" Colt asked, raising his eyebrows at me. He didn't even question Landon's presence.

"You're all capable of making your own breakfast," I told him. Landon continued eating his omelette, staring down at his plate.

"Not if you don't want us to burn the house down," Fawn said, a hand on her hip.

"Ever heard of cereal?" I asked.

"I have a better idea," Fawn said with a grin. "How about you take us out to breakfast since you kinda owe me anyway? I could really go for a stack of french toast at Betty's."

"Oh little Fawn, you'll have to do better than that. Remember what we talked about last night?"

Basically I told her she better be careful asking too much of me since I could tell our parents about her spending habits with her allowance and her savings from her summer job. She basically depleted her savings from the summer, buying clothes she only wore once and makeup that sat in her vanity untouched. They wouldn't be too happy to find out she had spent all the money she saved over the summer. I only found out because I paid attention. And because she started asking me for money.

Fawn glared at me and crossed her arms over her chest.

"But I suppose I could drop the three of you off at Betty's with my card."

Fawn's glare fell and a wide smile took over her face. She squealed and hugged me tightly.

"Thank you, Wren. I love you!"

Fawn pulled Ava along with her back upstairs while Colt went to the fridge to pour himself a glass of orange juice.

When I looked back at Landon, he was already looking at me.

"What?" I asked.

"You have a soft spot for your sister," he said.

"Don't you have one for yours?"

He nodded and looked back at his now empty plate.

Seeing even an inkling of sadness on his face made my chest feel hollow.

That feeling in my chest let me know I was in quite the predicament when it came to Landon. And I had no idea how I would get myself out of it.

**

Thanks for reading!

Let me know what you thought of the chapter :) Were you surprised Landon didn't freak out more? And that he let himself be a little vulnerable with Wren?

18

Landon Reilly

We lost our first two games. They were both on home ice and I only got about ten minutes of ice time in each. Rojas and the coaches were certain that we were just still finding our rhythm as a team and they would keep messing with the lines until they found something that worked.

They only chose three freshman to go on the trip to the first two away games of the season, both against schools in Minnesota. One of the freshman defensemen, Rivera, would be playing and Cooper was a healthy scratch, there only if we needed him.

I was centering the third line. I had never played on the third line in my life. I tried not to let that bother me. It wasn't like I could take Rojas's spot on the first line.

On the bright side, they had me rooming with Rivera instead of Cooper. I didn't think either of us would have survived the trip if we were stuck in a room together.

We had just finished our Friday night game and the team was having dinner in the restaurant at our hotel. Despite losing the game, spirits were still high among the team. I sat at the end of the table with my line mates, looking down at my phone.

Stella had posted a bunch of things on her story from her night out with her friends. The first picture was a selfie of her and Jess, which reminded me of the guilt I felt from the last time Jess and I spoke. The next post was video of James dancing and holding a drink in each hand. There were a few more videos of James before I got to the last picture she posted.

The last picture was Wren sitting at a table with a water in front of him. There was a closed book on the table and he was looking down at his phone. She captioned it "lame ass."

My heart lurched looking at him. I pressed on the picture to keep it on my screen.

Something had changed between us last weekend, for me at least. Waking up with him, spending time with him, just talking. It was different. I felt comfortable with him, cared for. And instead of that repulsing me, it scared me.

Wren didn't care about anything, let alone me, yet he still had a way of making me feel like he did. And that was just stupid on my part, letting myself feel things for someone who I wasn't even sure had emotions. Someone who definitely didn't feel anything for me.

I was still staring at the picture when I got a text from Wren. It was like he could tell I was thinking about him. I had to hide my thoughts from him even when we were a thousand miles away from each other.

From: Wren
Glad you're not here this weekend.

I furrowed my brow, confused as to why he would send that to me. It was like he knew my thoughts about him were stupid and he wanted to remind me that he didn't care. Another text came in.

From: Wren
James got us kicked out because he kept climbing over the bar.

To: Wren
I'm glad i'm not there either then

From: Wren
Your game was on in the bar.

"Who are you texting that has you smiling at your phone?" Landry, one of my line mates, asked. "I don't think I've ever even seen you smile."

I looked up from my phone to see the rest of my line mates were looking at me. Luckily, they were the only ones and this conversation hadn't spread to

the rest of the team.

"No one," I replied.

I hadn't even noticed that my lips had curled up into a smile after reading Wren's text. The thought of him watching my game both unnerved and excited me. It was a strange phenomena I felt with Wren, being both attracted to and repelled by him.

"Really?" Landry asked with a grin, raising his eyebrows at me and clearly not believing what I said. "You're not texting some girl from back home?"

"No, it's my sister," I lied. I felt slightly guilty at using Livi when I hadn't heard from her in a little while. I tried not to let my mind dwell on that.

"Oooh, a sister," Jacobs, another one of my line mates, chimed in. I narrowed my eyes at him.

"She's fifteen."

"Oh. Nevermind," Jacobs replied, looking apologetic while Landry let out a loud laugh and slapped him on the back.

Another text notification lit up my phone.

From: Wren
Isn't the premise of the game to get the puck in the net?

To: Wren
Are you texting me just to irritate me

From: Wren
I do enjoy irritating you, though it's a lot more fun doing it to your face.

This time I did feel myself start to smile and I wanted to punch myself for letting myself get amused at Wren, to feel happy that he was texting me. This was the sort of thing I wanted to avoid, but of course, Wren was impossible for me to avoid.

From: Wren
When will you be back? So I can properly irritate you.

To: Wren
Not until tomorrow night

From: Wren
How unfortunate.

I was trying to think of a response when another text came through from an unknown number.

From: Unknown
Landon it's livi going to call u

I got up from the table just as my phone started to ring. I waited to answer it until I was out of the room and on my way toward the elevator to go back up to my hotel room.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Hey!" Livi replied.

Relief rushed through me at the sound of her voice. I tried not to think too much about why she didn't contact me for a little while. She was only fifteen. Time got away from her. It didn't mean anything bad had happened.

"What's up?" I asked her, stepping into the elevator. "Everything alright?"

"Eh, it's been okay," she said. "Mom grounded me and took away my phone because she thought I wasn't focusing enough on skating, so I stopped going to practice until she ungrounded me."

"And things with Dad?"

"Still an asshole," she responded. "But he's not so bad with me. Not like he was with you. He said something about you the other day."

My eyes widened as I stepped out of the elevator and walked toward my room.

"What?" I asked. I found my room and unlocked the door before stepping inside and going toward my bed. I sat down, awaiting Livi's answer.

"He was talking to Mom about me and my skating and said something like 'Landon was like that at her age. He was losing focus. Olivia is not losing focus.' And Mom got super upset. They act like you're dead or something."

At least my father hadn't said anything about seeing me last weekend. Maybe I hid myself well enough that he really didn't see me at all. I still didn't like the idea of him speaking about me, of him referring to me at all. I would rather he act like I just didn't exist. That was something I had wished for even back when I was living with him, back when he would make me feel worthless even before he knew of my sexuality, the ways he would prepare me for the upcoming hockey season.

*

I fell to the ground, exhaustion taking over me. I just needed a break. Just a minute and I could be back on my feet.

"Get up, Landon," Dad demanded, standing over me. "Did I tell you to stop?"

I looked up at him, my breathing heavy. "No."

"Then why did you stop?" he asked, his voice low and calm. But I knew better than to trust his voice. He was not calm. He was angry. "Do you want to be out of shape when hockey season starts? Do you want all those guys to skate circles around you because you were lazy the whole off season, because you've been eating like shit and not following the diet and work out schedule I laid out for you? Why should I even bother doing that for you if you're not going to follow it?"

I pushed myself up onto one knee, still breathing heavy.

"Should I stop letting you go hang out with your friends?" Dad continued. "Because they're undisciplined in their diets and when you're with them, you eat shit! And I can tell when you're not eating right. I've told you time and time again, you need to remain disciplined if you want to be successful. You're going into your last season before high school and what do I say about high school hockey?"

I let out a deep breath. "It's the most important hockey I'll play. It's how I get scouted for college hockey and it sets the tone for my hockey career."

"That's right," he said. "So are you going to give up everything we've worked for and give up the only thing you're good at or are you going to get up and work?"

I didn't say anything. I just stood up and continued the drills my father had planned for me that day. It was so much running that I couldn't feel my legs anymore. I was breathing so hard, it felt like my throat was bleeding. When I stopped and threw up in the grass, my father didn't say anything. He waited for me to finish and then ordered me to start running again.

After the running was over, he made me stand about thirty feet away from him. Then he shot tennis balls at me with a hockey stick and made me block his shots. Even though I was a forward, he always wanted me to be a two-way player, so he made sure we focused on my defensive skills as well.

When the sun started going down was when he finally called it quits for the night. I was exhausted and bruised. My legs felt like they were going to give out on me at any moment.

"You go take a shower and go to bed," Dad said as we entered the house. "You need rest so we can continue training tomorrow."

Livi and Mom were sitting on the couch watching a movie. Mom smiled over at me and gestured for me to go to her.

"How was training?" she asked, pulling me down toward her so she could kiss my cheek.

"It was fine," I muttered.

"He needs to put in a lot more work," Dad interjected. "We should have never let him go to that sleep over at the Hanson's. They fed those kids a bunch of junk and it shows. Boys shouldn't be having sleep overs at this age anyway."

Mom shook her head but didn't say anything. Dad gestured for me to go upstairs, so I did. I fought through the pain and got in the shower, what felt like the longest shower of my life. And I braced myself to do it all over again tomorrow.

*

"Landon?" Livi called out.

"Sorry, I zoned out," I replied, trying to shake the memories from my head.

"I was just saying that Jimmy Murphy asked me out on a date," she said.

"What?" Jimmy Murphy was on the JV hockey team last year when he was a sophomore. Apparently he had been named captain of the varsity team this year, according to Livi.

"I don't know if I'll say yes," Livi continued. "I don't think Dad will approve and Mom doesn't want me dating at all."

"You never know," I said. I didn't like the thought of my little sister dating, but she was fifteen and I didn't want her missing out on this stuff like I did. "Maybe they'll be okay with it."

"Doubt it," she said with a sigh. "Anyway, how's hockey going?"

"We lost our first three games."

"Bummer, but I'm sure you guys will start winning soon," she replied. "Any boys I should know about? Secret romance on the hockey team?"

I hesitated for just a moment before she was yelling in my ear.

"There is someone!" Livi exclaimed. I had to pull the phone away from my ear for a moment.

"No, Olivia," I denied. "There is *no one* ."

"You're lying!" she said excitedly. "You hesitated! It's okay. You can tell me when you're ready."

I scoffed. "Okay."

"Anyway, got to go," Livi said. "We'll talk soon."

"Yeah, let's plan to meet up soon."

"Yes, definitely. Love you."

"Love you too."

I laid back in bed, staring at the ceiling. I missed my sister. I missed... No, I didn't miss Wren. That was the most idiotic thought that had ever sprung up in my head. It was just that these away games made me feel lonely. I wasn't interested in hanging out with any of these guys. At least back at school I was too busy to even feel lonely. And I somehow ended up seeing Wren most weekends anyway. But now that the season was in full swing, that was going to end. I was going to end up alone in hotel rooms a lot of the time.

I picked my phone up to finally text him back.

To: Wren
Unfortunate for you
I'm enjoying the time away

That was a lie, but he wouldn't be able to tell that through text.

From: Wren
You can't possibly be saying you don't miss me.

To: Wren
That is what i'm syaing

Saying*

From: Wren
Well, I know that's a lie. Otherwise, you wouldn't be texting me.

He didn't even comment on my spelling mistake.

To: Wren
Did you forget that you texted me first

From: Wren
You're the one who keeps texting me back.

I thought about what I would say next for too long. And even though it unsettled me and made me feel nervous, I sent it anyway.

To: Wren
Maybe you're the one who misses me

He didn't respond for a moment and that made my nerves even worse.

From: Wren
I'm glad to see you're finally using the correct "you're."

I let out a deep breath and mentally cursed at him. He was insufferable and infuriating.

To: Wren
You're infuriating

From: Wren
Great job. Now all you have to do is add punctuation to your sentences.

To: Wren
Dont you have better things to do than annoy me over text

From: Wren
I do, but I haven't been able to annoy you in a few days.

To: Wren
Which has been great for me

From: Wren
And not so great for me. When you're back, I'll have to work extra hard to annoy you. I know how much you like it when I make you mad.

I was grinning at my phone like an idiot when another notification popped up on my phone. It was an Instagram message from Stella.

From: Stella
Hey Landon!!! I'm having a little get together at my dorm on Sunday night. You're invited<3 Hope to see you!

Without even thinking, I replied.

To: Stella
Sounds good see you then

And now I just had to get through tomorrow.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading! Please let me know what you thought of the chapter! What did you think of the flashback with Landon's father? And his texts with Wren?

19

Landon Reilly

We won our last away game, our first win of the season, and while all the guys on the team were happy about that, I was happier about being able to go back home.

We didn't get back to campus until late Saturday night. I was exhausted from travel, yet still too wired to fall asleep. Kyle came back into the room around two in the morning and I was still lying in bed, staring at the ceiling.

Kyle left the light off as he moved through the room, assuming I was asleep.

"You can turn the light on," I said, glancing over at him.

"Oh, you're awake." The light turned on and I squinted at Kyle as my eyes adjusted.

"Yeah," I said, groaning as I stretched out. "Can't sleep."

"Well, at least you have all day tomorrow to just chill out," he said, moving toward his closet to change. I looked away from him, staring back at the ceiling. "Unless... you're going to Stella's tomorrow right?"

I looked over at him now that he was dressed.

"I was planning on it." With the hope of Wren being there. I didn't know when I started *hoping* to see Wren. Whenever it changed from hoping to avoid him to hoping to see him was lost on me. I wasn't going to think too much about it.

"I would go but I have other plans," Kyle said. "And I was just hanging out with her today."

"At her place?" I asked before I could stop myself. "With Jess and... Wren? And James."

"Just Stella, Jess, and James," he replied. "James said Wren was watching porn or something."

"He's just always working on his computer," I said and mentally cursed at myself. I shouldn't care about what Wren was doing and I definitely shouldn't be explaining his actions to my roommate so he wouldn't think he was some weird porn addict.

Kyle just shrugged and turn the light off, using his phone light to guide him over to his bed before climbing in.

It wasn't until around four in the morning that I actually fell asleep and it wasn't for long. I was awake by eight, my internal clock deciding for me that I couldn't sleep in. I quietly got out of bed and got changed for my run, seeing the running pants Wren had let me borrow as I rummaged through my drawer. I should've returned those to him by now.

After getting changed, I left the dorm and started on my running route. My mind was everywhere as I went through campus. There were very few people out at this time, most of the student body probably having been out all night the night before. I hadn't even remembered to bring my headphones, but that didn't bother me like I thought it would.

Listening to the birds chirping, the water running, the wind blowing the leaves around, it was peaceful.

I was almost at the coffee shop when I saw a familiar face running my way. I slowed down to a stop, meeting him in the middle. It surprised me that he even stopped, taking both his airpods out of his ears.

"Hi," I greeted breathlessly.

"Hi," Wren replied with a grin. "You missed me?"

I rolled my eyes. "You wish."

"It seems like you did," Wren said.

"You're making that up."

Wren shrugged. "Maybe I am."

It was hard trying to deny my attraction to him anymore. He looked good, he always did. Especially in this state where he was slightly breathless and sweaty, putting all sorts of images in my head.

Wren looked me up and down and it didn't even cause me to want to shrivel up and hide. I *wanted* him to look at me. I wanted to know that I wasn't the only one with this attraction. He was a lot less shy about it, didn't care what I thought about him.

"Are you running to get coffee?" I asked. "We could... go there together or something. If you want." I could practically feel the color rise on my cheeks. And by the smug look on his face, I could tell Wren saw it too.

"I would love to, you know I would," Wren started. "But I have to get going, I'm afraid. I'm very busy today."

"Oh."

"Yes, so I'll have to give you a rain check on that date."

I frowned at him. "I wasn't asking you on a date. I was just saying—"

"I know what you were saying," he cut me off. "You're cute when you're all pouty. I'll see you around."

And with that, he was gone before I had time to even formulate a response. I was *not* pouting. Although, I did have to actively force myself to keep from frowning as I finished my run and headed into the coffee shop.

I didn't care if Wren didn't have time to come with me. I didn't. Knowing him, he was probably just messing with me because I asked. But I didn't care. I could get coffee and sit in our usual spot without him.

Anthony was at the counter as usual when I walked in.

"Wren's not in yet," Anthony said as I walked up.

"Oh, uh, yeah," I awkwardly replied. "He's not coming."

"Oh," Anthony said, squinting in confusion. "Okay. Want your usual?"

I nodded and gave Anthony my card to pay. He tried it a couple times then looked up at me.

"It's declining," he said in a quiet voice.

"Oh shit," I said, digging into my pockets to find some cash. Of course, I had none. "Never mind then."

I turned to walk away just as Anthony called out to me.

"Don't worry about it. It's on me," he said sending the order through.

The action made me uncomfortable. I didn't want to be handed anything, especially not after my card embarrassingly declined over a four dollar cup of coffee.

"Nah, I'm all set." My voice was tight as I tried not to snap at Anthony.

"Too late. I already put it through," he said with a grin.

I glared at him.

"Oh no, you're an angry customer because last time we fucked up your coffee. Here's one on the house to make up for it."

"I don't want anything for free," I said through gritted teeth.

"Then I'll just charge Wren for it next time he's in," Anthony said with a shrug. "He deserves it for being so goddamn annoying."

I cringed at that and before I knew it, my name was being called out for my drink.

Anthony gestured toward the drink and I grabbed it, grumbling a "thanks" before heading over to my usual table. This time I sat in the seat that Wren usually occupied. While the seat I usually sat in had my back to the rest of the coffee shop, Wren's seat had a view of the whole thing. I wondered if he did that on purpose and sat here just analyzing everyone that walked in. Maybe that was what he was obsessively working on on his computer every time he was in here, running notes on everyone he saw.

I sipped on my coffee while texting with Micah about hockey and school. It went like most of our conversations which was just him obviously checking in on me but acting like that wasn't what he was doing and then saying he wished I called him more like he was my grandmother or something. I appreciated Micah and everything he has done for me, but he sometimes acted like more of a parent to me than anything.

As I was texting Micah, another message showed up on my screen.

From: Wren
Are you going to be at Stella's tonight?

To: Wren
i was thinking about it
Why

He didn't answer for a few minutes and I began to lose hope that he would. Then as I finished my coffee, he replied.

From: Wren
She said you were and I didn't believe her.

To: Wren
Does it matter

From: Wren
I suppose not.

I wasn't going to ask him if he was going to be there. He would have too much fun with that, with knowing that I wanted him there, that I wanted to see him. That was the thing with Wren. If you amused him in anyway, he would take it and run with it. He probably already knew anyway.

So, instead of answering Wren, I got up and threw out my cup, waving goodbye to Anthony as I left the coffee shop and walked back to campus to go to the fitness center. I spent a couple of hours in there lifting weights and other exercises. Once I was done in there, I went back to the dorm to shower and work on homework while I waited to go over to Stella's.

Stella messaged me the time she was having people over, so at around eight, I left my dorm and took the bus toward Brown. I got off at the campus and walked toward the dorm building, having to wait outside for a few minutes to go in behind somebody else when they unlocked the door.

I somehow remembered exactly where to go despite not having been there many times. I slowly walked up the stairs, suddenly feeling anxious about the whole thing. Anxious about being around people I didn't really consider friends, around people I didn't know, seeing Jess. Seeing Wren.

I could have just turned around and gone back to campus. No one there would even care if I actually showed up. I could just leave, tell Stella something came up if she asked about it. It's not like I'd be missed if I didn't show. No one was relying on me to be there and if I didn't want to go I didn't have to.

But my feet continued carrying me up the steps, passing by other students who were on their way down looking like they were already drunk.

When I got up to Stella's floor, I could instantly see her room. The door was cracked open slightly and a pink line was shining in her room, the light pouring out into the hallway. When I got closer I could see that the door on the room across from her, Wren's room, was also open. It wasn't enough that I could see in there, but enough to tell the light was on.

I stood there for a moment, debating on what to do. I heard voices coming from Stella's room, telling me she already had people over. I should have

just knocked and walked in where I was expected. But Wren's room being open made me think twice.

I could just poke my head in and see if he was in there. He never said anything about going to Stella's tonight. But it could be James in there, or the both of them, and I didn't want to embarrass myself by just walking right into their room.

I was still standing out in the hall when a door further down opened and a group of people walked out. I didn't even really have time to think before I was opening Wren's door and walking inside. I shut the door behind me and leaned back against it.

When I looked up, Wren was staring at me with raised eyebrows, sitting at his desk with his laptop open.

"Sure, Lance, come on in," he said in a teasing tone.

"I,uh, your door was open," I said, not moving from my spot against the door.

"Do you just walk into any open doors you find?" he asked with a grin.

"I... shut up."

"Or did you just want to see me so bad?" Wren asked, standing up from his desk and shutting his laptop. I didn't say anything. "It's okay to say you wanted to see me."

"No, I didn't want to see you." He knew I was lying. He had his signature smug look as he walked over to me. He looked me up and down like he did this morning before his eyes settled on me face.

"Well, I wanted to see you," Wren said.

"I... you what?"

"I'll admit it's a strange predicament to be in," Wren continued. "But you were gone all weekend."

I tried to force a teasing grin on my face despite the unease I felt.

"So you missed me," I said.

"I didn't say that."

"You don't have to," I shot back.

He stared at me for a moment, then looked down briefly before looking back at my face.

"I guess I don't," he admitted. "But neither do you. You came in here because you wanted to see me, because you missed me."

He stepped closer and I couldn't tell if the nerves I felt came from wanting to get away from him or from wanting to get closer, to be chest to chest with him, feeling his breathing in sync with my own.

I hated everything about this. I hated that I wanted him to come with me for coffee this morning and how bad I felt when he rejected me. I hated that I wanted to be alone with him before going to Stella's and I hated that being away fro him all weekend made me want him more. It was like being away from him made my attraction stronger, made me more aware of the fact that I wanted to be around him, that even though he annoyed me and made me angry, I didn't want to be away from him.

I hated even more that I didn't know the extent of his attraction, if he just wanted me because I challenged him and if I gave into him when he wanted me to, he would be done with me after that. I didn't think I could handle that.

"Why are you thinking so hard right now?" he asked, tilting his head to the side like he was genuinely confused.

"Because you make me nervous," I said without even thinking. I hated being too vulnerable with him. It felt like he thrived off of my vulnerabilities and could use it as ammunition.

But instead of grinning or joking, he stepped closer. He looked at my lips and bit down on his bottom one. He looked both contemplative and unsure. I didn't think I had ever seen Wren look unsure the whole time I had known him. I always thought he was a creature who was so sure of himself he never had any doubts.

He stepped closer, his face close to mine.

"Does this make you nervous?" he asked. "Or is this okay?"

"Both."

His lips quirked up slightly.

"I'll say it," Wren started. "I kinda did miss you in a weird way."

"In a weird way?"

"Mhm," he hummed. "And now I kinda want to kiss you. In a weird way."

My breath stopped for a moment.

"So do it." I didn't think about anything else. Just his lips on mine. Fuck the consequence. Fuck how this would make me feel afterwards.

"If you insist," he said. He was smirking now and he leaned in. My heart sped up, my hands in fists at my sides as I waited for Wren's kiss.

Then all of a sudden the door opened behind me, sending me jolting forward and knocking my head into Wren's mouth.

"Ah, fuck," Wren cursed, rubbing his mouth where my head hit him. I rubbed the spot on my face where I knocked into him and turned around to see James in the doorway.

"Wren, *let's go* ," James said impatiently. "You said you'd come to Stella's. Oh, hi Landon."

I waved to him, my other hand still on my face. He gave us each a strange look, seeming to have a mental exchange with Wren.

Wren let out a sigh and pushed James through the door.

"You really are a pain in the ass, you know that?" Wren snapped.

James smirked, his eyes lighting up. "A pain in *your* ass, that's for sure. Now let's go."

My stomach dropped a the implication of James's words and now I wanted nothing to do with going to Stella's. Not when all I could think about was Wren and James being together.

Wren pushed James again and grabbed onto my wrist, dragging me with him to Stella's.

There wasn't actually that many people there. It was just Stella, Jess, Stella's roommate Cali, and a couple of her friends. But the fact that there were only a few of us didn't matter anymore now that I had a bad feeling in my stomach because of what happened with Wren and what James had said.

It shouldn't even bother me, but it did. I felt so stupid for letting it bother me.

"Yay! You guys are here!" Stella exclaimed, throwing her arms up in the air and stumbling into Jess who caught her with a smile on her face.

Wren dragged me into the room and sat down on a bean bag chair, pulling me down with him. The two of us barely even fit on this thing and being near him was too much for me at the moment. And now we were squished together on this stupid bean bag chair.

"Landon, what are you drinking?" Stella asked, gesturing toward the many bottles of alcohol she had spread across her desk.

I almost said nothing, but I stopped myself. I needed something to take the edge off or I was going to be miserable all night.

"The strongest thing you have," I told her.

Stella snapped her fingers at me, nodding as she poured me a cup of clear liquid.

It tasted like shit of course, and Wren side eyed me while I downed the whole thing. I let Stella get me more alcohol and I was eventually loosened up enough that I was up dancing with her, Jess, and James, badly singing along to whatever song she had playing.

Wren just watched from the same bean bag chair, his unreadable eyes on me. And in my drunken state, I liked the feeling of his eyes on me, his lips pressed together, his serious expression.

And despite my drunkenness, that image of his face would be something I remembered.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter!!

20

Wren Ridley

I was laying on my stomach, one arm underneath my pillow and still half asleep when Landon shook me awake. I only cracked my eyes open slightly and saw his glaring face as he lay on his side against the wall. The two of us barely fit in my bed, but that didn't seem to matter until now.

"Get up," Landon said, shaking me again.

"You can't even let me sleep in after I took care of you last night?" I asked, glancing at him through sleepy eyes.

His glare stayed settled on me like he was trying to move me with his mind.

I wanted to kiss him, and the thought made me feel queasy. But now the thought was there and it wouldn't leave, not after almost kissing him last night, not while I was looking at him with his hair a mess and eyes narrowed that were still a little swollen from sleep.

I let my head rest on my hand, my elbow braced against the pillow holding my head up, and I grinned at him.

"Get that stupid fucking smile off your stupid face and move," Landon snapped.

"You wanted to kiss my stupid face last night," I reminded him, which I knew would only make him angry, but I couldn't stop myself.

His glare hardened, but instead of responding, or punching me in my stupid face, Landon climbed over me to get off the bed. He threw one leg over my waist, and we made the briefest eye contact before he moved the other one over and hopped off the bed.

"Lance, I don't get why you're angry," I said, sitting up as he gathered his phone and keys I had laid out on my desk for him.

He whipped his head back at me with a frown, then let out a humorless laugh.

"You don't get why I'm angry?" he asked rhetorically. "I'm fucking angry because of you!"

I raised my eyebrows. " *Me?* I don't recall doing anything between last night and this morning to make you angry at me."

"You almost kissed me!"

"With your permission."

"It doesn't matter!" he shouted, throwing his hands in the air. "You got into my head, made me want things I shouldn't want, that I can't want!"

"And how exactly did I do that?"

I stood up from the bed and he stepped away from me.

"You just do," he said. "And it ruins me."

"I thought you were getting better," I started. "You know, with all the religious trauma."

"Shut the fuck up. You don't know anything about it. You don't understand."

"You're right. I really don't," I told him. "But if you need to blame me to make yourself feel better, that's fine."

He didn't respond to that, just stared at me.

"However, I think we both know that it's not really me that has you feeling like this," I said. His eyes left my face for a brief second.

I walked over to my dresser and picked up the clothes Landon had left the last time he was here and handed them over. He ripped them out of my grasp and made his way to the door.

"And Lance," I said, causing him to pause just before he opened it. "Next time you want to kiss me, you have to make the first move."

Landon didn't look back. He opened the door and let it slam behind him as he left the room.

James walked in a few moments later, looking like he had been asleep for the past year.

"What did you do to Landon?" he asked, yawning and scratching the back of his head. "I saw him when I was coming out of Stella's and he looked absolutely pissed."

I sat down at my desk, opening up my laptop to check my school email.

"Oh, he's just running late for class."

***

"Why is my latte so expensive?" I asked Anthony later on that morning when I made my way to the coffee shop.

"It's the annoying customer tax," he said with a blank look.

"What happened to the favorite customer discount?"

"The annoying customer has to pay the tax so that the favorite customer can get the discount," Anthony explained.

"And you gave someone else my discount?"

"You never got that discount."

I shrugged and paid for the latte and whatever else he put on my order.

Once I got my drink, I went to my usual spot and opened up my laptop. I had a lot of work I needed to get done between the novel I was working on, my coursework, and the research I was assisting one of my professors with. Even with all that in front of me, I still kept looking toward the door every time it opened to see if Landon had walked in. It was never him.

Not only was I letting that distract me from my work, but my phone was blowing up from a group chat my mother made with her, Dad, Fox, and me. Apparently Fox had games against Brown and Providence College coming up in a few weeks and our parents wanted to make a weekend out of it and decided that had to be planned right now.

To: Group
When is this?

From: Mom
Thanksgiving weekend!
Fox has games on that Friday and Saturday :)
It will be fun!

To: Group
Sure it will.

From: Fox
ur an ass

To: Group
Okay.

From: Mom
No fighting! We will have fun as a family <3

At that point in the conversation, Dad just started sending random emojis because for some reason he was so fascinated by them. He sent a fox and bird with hearts next to each of them.

I put my phone facing down on the table and continued doing coursework. I still glanced at the door every so often, and cursed at myself for doing so,

but Landon never came.

***

Landon Reilly

After class I went straight to the practice facility to use the gym even though I didn't have to be there for a few more hours. I hopped on the treadmill, since I didn't get my run in this morning, and hoped that it would help clear my head.

It didn't. At all.

I still only thought of Wren and how fucked up I was for letting myself want him. Letting myself want to be kissed by him. I could just hear my father in the back of my mind telling me how disgusting I was, that I would burn in hell for eternity. As much as I wanted to tell myself that it didn't bother me anymore, it did. I still let him haunt me.

And my situation with Wren only made it worse. Wren texting me while I was away and lonely, making me miss him, Wren using sweet words last night and making me think he missed me too, that he wanted me the way I wanted him. It made me sick to my stomach.

I couldn't be with a man even if I wanted to. It would always come back to this, to me freaking out, remembering all the times my father made me hate myself, and to me continuing to hate myself even after my father was out of my life. All that damage he caused always came back.

It was just as well because I knew Wren didn't actually want me. He wanted me because he couldn't have me. Because I intrigued him, like he told me. I would just be something to occupy his time. It wouldn't mean anything to him, not the way it would to me. It wouldn't stay with him, take up space in his mind, in his heart. It wouldn't change the way he saw himself.

I would be someone just like James to him, someone that was just there and convenient.

The treadmill said I had already done five miles. Some of my teammates filed into the gym, doing their own workouts before practice started. I took this moment to go outside and take a break to call Matthew Hanson.

"Hey Landon! How are you?" he answered cheerfully.

"Fine, you?"

"I'm great," he replied. I let out a deep breath.

"So, uh, I hate to ask you this, but I was wondering if you could add some more money to my account," I said, feeling like I was going to vomit at the words.

I hated asking the Hansons for money. They had already given me so much, but I was desperate and my coaches wouldn't take too kindly to me getting a job that interfered with my hockey schedule. Hockey was the whole reason I was here in the first place. It was the reason I didn't have to pay a shit ton of money to be here, so it had to be a priority. I had looked into some on campus jobs, but most of them either interfered with my classes or hockey.

"Oh! Yes, of course," Mathew said. "I try to keep an eye on yours and Micah's accounts, but I don't even remember the last time I checked."

"Thanks, I really appreciate it."

"So how's everything going with you? Everything okay?"

"It's... it's going," I said.

"Did you ever make an appointment with one of the counselors at school?"

That was something my therapist had wanted me to do while I was away and couldn't have regular sessions with her, but I had neglected it thinking I didn't really need to go. Now I was rethinking that decision.

"I've been busy," I told him, which was mostly true.

"I know you are," he agreed. "But your mental health is important, just as important as your physical health. Would your coaches let you get away without seeing the trainer if you got hurt during a game?"

"No."

"Exactly," Matthew replied. "I don't want to double down on you, Landon, but I want you to find time to go to a counselor there okay? They might be able to help you and refer you to a therapist in the area."

It wasn't like I could say no. This man was giving me money. He gave me a place to stay, got me into this school, onto this hockey team. I owed him and his wife so much. The least I could do was do what he asked of me, especially since it was for my own benefit.

"Yeah, will do."

"Alright. I'll let you go. Im sure you have practice soon," Matthew said. "Call me any time, Landon."

"Okay. thanks again."

We said our goodbyes and I made my way back into the gym. It was more full now. A lot of the team liked to warm up before practice started.

Rojas was over in the corner stretching. He nodded at me in acknowledgment when he saw me enter the room.

Cooper was in there too, but we both did our best to avoid each other now.

Practice was the same as always. I did as the coaches said and didn't speak to anyone. Rojas came over a couple times and tapped me on the back with his stick like he was checking in on me, giving me encouragement. That was his job as captain, a job I failed at when I was captain of my own team.

After practice I went to the dining hall to have a big dinner filled with protein and greens. While I ate, I scrolled through my phone for information about the counseling services at school and sent an email to try to set up an appointment that didn't over lap with class or hockey.

Then later I went to the library to work on homework, which was something I never imagined myself doing. But there was something keeping me from going back to my room where I was be all alone, knowing Kyle wouldn't be there. It felt too lonely. At least I was around other people so long as I stayed out of my room.

Rojas had found me in the library and sat down across from me. I didn't look up at him until he slowly closed my laptop.

"What?" I asked in a hushed tone.

"I haven't seen you in here before," he said, leaning back in his chair.

"So?"

Rojas shrugged. "You seemed pretty down at practice today, more down than usual. Everything okay?"

I narrowed my eyes. "I'm fine."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," I snapped. "I don't know why you think I need to be checked in on like I'm a child but it's not necessary."

Rojas smiled at me, completely unfazed by my outburst.

"Because you're a freshman and I've been there before," he said. "It's a difficult time, a huge transition. It can be very stressful. I just want to make sure you're okay."

I didn't answer.

"And if any of the guys on the team are giving you a hard time I want to know about it," he continued.

"Why would anyone be giving me a hard time?"

"Because you don't talk to anyone, so you're kind of the odd one out."

I couldn't tell if he knew more, knew of my sexuality. It wasn't like it was a secret, that came out last year. My whole town knew, the whole hockey team. And that kind of news spread around the hockey community in our area.

"Just say what you actually want to say," I snapped.

Rojas stared at me for a moment before responding.

"I don't want any hatred or bigotry on our team," he said, staring at me intently. "There's too much of that in the hockey community and it needs to change. And it will not happen under my watch, so if there's anything you need to tell me, I'd appreciate it if you did."

I couldn't tell if he knew something had happened with Cooper or if he really just thought I was being bullied.

"Nothing is going on," I said, gathering my things. "And I have to go."

I stormed out of the library, not bothering to spare Rojas a glance. I took the stairs down to avoid having to stand with anyone in the elevator. Once I was outside, the sun was setting and the temperature outside had turned chilly. The breeze went over my cheeks, surely making them red.

Instead of going back toward my dorm, I walked down the long path that led off campus and walked through the city, down near the water where the air was even cooler.

I was completely alone with my thoughts, staring out at the light that glistened from the water.

I wanted to go back to before I knew Wren, before he got into my head and messed with my thoughts and desires and feelings. Things would be less complicated for me without him. I wouldn't have these desires. I could have just been content with myself. No one else but me.

But Wren had to come along and make me want him, to make me momentarily forget everything that had been instilled in me. And that was

what made it feel worse once I came back to my senses. Once I remembered everything my father ever said to me, it made it hurt even worse that I was exactly what he said.

I hadn't worked out yet in my brain that his words didn't matter, that it was okay to be me, okay to let myself want things. To want Wren.

A text came through on my phone. I had been standing outside longer than I had realized and it was completely dark now. I checked my phone and saw a text from Wren.

From: Wren
Want to go for a drive?

I stared at the screen. I didn't know what to say or what to do.

I just stared like an answer would be write itself.

I hoped it would.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter :)

21

TRIGGER WARNING: brief mention of self harm/suicide

Landon Reilly

I never wanted to get used to being in Wren's car, but it had become a familiar place for me. It was always clean, and it had an air freshener hanging from the rear view mirror that had a new car scent. The seats were leather with a section of suede on the back. And there was nothing in it to really personalize it which somehow actually made it even more *Wren* .

Neither of us said anything when I got in the car. He just started driving, nothing but silence between us. He didn't even have one of his stupid audiobooks playing. I couldn't tell if that meant there was something going on with him or if he just wanted to sit in silence.

When we got on the high way was when I finally decided to speak up.

"Where are we going?" I asked, glancing over at him.

At first glance, Wren just looked the same as he always did. Casual, unbothered, calm, collected. But when I looked closer I noticed his jaw was set tightly, his eyes set intently on the road, and his hands gripping the steering wheel like he was afraid it would fall off.

"Where are we going?" I repeated, more urgency in my tone.

The tension slipped from his face so fast that I questioned if it was even there in the first place. He glanced at me briefly before setting his eyes back on the road.

"Just going for a drive," he said. "There doesn't always have to be a destination."

"But why?"

I was asking myself that question as much as I was asking him. Why did he want me to come with him and why did I say yes? I was still angry with him and myself for the way he made me feel, yet I opened myself up for these feelings by getting in his car just because he asked me to.

I always wanted to be alone, but I didn't like feeling lonely. With Wren it was just... different.

"Because driving is calming for me," Wren replied.

"You're always calm," I retorted with a scoff.

"I'm glad it appears that way," he said.

I stared at him, unsure on how to take that. Wren never let himself be vulnerable. He always had this mask of indifference, hiding the deepest parts of himself away so far that it seemed like those parts didn't even exist. But, just for a brief moment, he let that mask slip, revealing a side to him I'd never seen. A side that showed he wasn't always as collected as he seemed.

"I don't know why I agreed to this," I admitted.

Wren grinned. "Because you can't stay away from me, despite thinking that I ruin you."

"You do ruin me," I said, though I knew I couldn't blame him for my feelings. "You're insufferable."

"Hm," Wren hummed.

The fact that he had no words for that made me slightly guilty that I was placing blame on him that he didn't deserve. It was my own mind and demons that made me feel the way I did. But I couldn't admit that to him, I couldn't let him have something else over me.

"It's you who can't stay away from me," I said with a glare.

"Hm," Wren hummed again. "I suppose you're right about that. At least I don't try to hide it."

I didn't have anything to say to that.

We stayed silent for a while after that. Wren pulled off the highway and stopped at a drive through, ordering two orders of fries and two waters. He placed the waters in the cupholders then handed the bag of fries off to me before driving away.

"Can you feed me a fry?" Wren asked, and I gave him an incredulous stare. "Well?"

"No."

"But I'm starving," Wren continued. "You wouldn't want me to starve, would you?"

"I think you'll manage."

"I don't think I will. I'm already starting to feel faint. Any moment now I'll __"

I cut him off by shoving a fry into his mouth just to shut him up.

Wren's lip brushed against my finger as he took the fry into his mouth and I froze there for a moment. He glanced at me briefly, his mouth still, just barely, touching my finger. I pulled away when his eyes met mine, wiping my hand on my pants and looking away from him through the window.

This was exactly why he messed with my head. Any small gesture or moment and I was feeling all sorts of things inside of me I couldn't place, things I was better off not feeling at all. But as time went on, it seemed more and more like there was nothing I could do about it. Being in Wren's presence was always going to bring about these feelings. The only thing I could actually do would be to stay away from him forever. But the universe seemed to always have a way of brining us back together.

"Another fry please," Wren said, pulling me from my thoughts.

I held the bag out for him and he shook his head.

"I can't take a hand off the wheel," he said.

"I'm not going to keep feeding you."

He sighed. "Fine. We're almost there anyway."

I didn't even have a chance to ask where before we were pulling into a familiar place. A vaguely familiar place, somewhere Wren had taken me before.

I didn't remember much from that night. But I did remember crying in this seat in front of this same view of the beach. I remembered Wren's kindness that night and the day after and how he never held that night against me.

"Do you come here a lot?" I asked as Wren parked the car and took his fries out of the bag.

He shrugged as he began eating.

"Not as much as I want to," he replied. "I like to come here to be alone."

Yet he brought me with him.

"So why the fuck am I here?"

He looked over at me, the shine of the moon glistening over his skin and making his eyes sparkle. I felt taken aback for a moment with his stare on me.

"You said the same thing that night," he said.

"What?"

"The first night I took you here, when you were screaming at me in my room, you said I ruined you."

I didn't remember that, though I believed I had said it. It was something that always crossed my mind. Whenever he made me feel the way I did, my fathers voice was always in my head telling me I was disgusting, immoral, ruined.

"And you said it earlier," Wren continued. "When we woke up. You calmed down when I took you for a drive last time, took you here. I figured if you're saying the same thing, you're probably in a similar headspace, feeling the same way you felt that night."

I was at a loss for words. This was a side of Wren I hadn't seen, not much of anyway. This caring, thoughtful side that could change my entire view of him.

I didn't want him to show me this side of him. I needed to see what he usually showed me, the side of him that frustrated me and made me so angry.

Because seeing him this way only made me feel guilty about the blame I placed on him for my feelings.

It made me question who the real Wren was.

"I don't need you to take care of me," I muttered, staring at the side of his face as he looked out at the ocean.

He didn't turn to look at me, didn't say a word. And that only made me angry.

"Do you hear me?" I asked, louder this time. "I don't need this. I don't need you. You think you know everything, but you don't. You sit there and act like you know the answer to all my problems, but you don't know *anything* . I don't need you to take me on drives and buy me food and do whatever the fuck else you think calms me down. I don't need you."

He finally turned to face me again, this time with an infuriating grin on his face. I wanted to look away, hating that I still let myself be attracted to him. I hated the way the moonlight made him glow and I hated the grin that

worked as a mask, hiding his true emotions from his face. I hated him and I hated myself.

"But you came anyway," Wren said, his voice soft and smooth, almost seductive.

And he was right. He always was. He saw right through my words and knew it was all just garbage I was spewing to make myself feel better.

I wished I could walk away from him, but it felt like he was the only person around me that actually knew me.

So I went with him on this drive, and I probably always would.

***

When I checked into the counselor's office on Wednesday afternoon, they handed me a questionnaire to fill out while I waited for my appointment.

1. Are you having suicidal thoughts right now, or have you had suicidal thoughts within the past month?

I circled no. I hadn't gotten to that point. It was more just the thought of not wanting to exist, which I was sure any therapist wouldn't like to hear that either.

I moved onto the next question.

2. Are you having any homicidal thoughts right now, or have you had homicidal thoughts within the past month.

An easy no. Unless wanting to strangle Wren should be considered a homicidal thought.

3. Do you have supportive people in your life?

I circled yes after a brief pause. I had the Hansons. And Livi.

4. How is your relationship with your family?

The options were: excellent, good, fair, bad. None of them seemed to accurately describe my relationship with my family. My relationship with Livi was good, my relationship with my parents was worse than bad.

I left that one blank.

I didn't have a chance to finish the rest of the questions before I was being called into the counselor's office.

My counselor was named Ms. Rivera. She was just a counselor at the school, not an actual therapist. I was told she was going to evaluate me and refer me to a therapist in the area after our session.

"Come on in, Landon," she said with a warm smile. "I can take that questionnaire from you."

I handed her the paper and followed her into her office. She closed the door behind us and gestured for me to sit down in the seat in front of her desk. Ms. Rivera sat behind the desk and looked over the questionnaire.

"It's okay that you didn't get through all of it," she said, looking up from the page. "We'll still talk about it."

I cleared my throat and nodded. "Alright."

"Let's start with the family question," Ms. Rivera continued. "Are the supportive people in your life your family?"

"One of them," I said. "My sister."

"But not your parents?"

I shook my head. "No."

She nodded and wrote something down on the sheet.

"Have you ever intentionally physically harmed yourself?" she asked.

"No."

She wrote that down.

"Can you tell me about why you're seeking therapy?"she asked, looking back up at me.

I adjusted the way I was sitting. This chair was uncomfortable and I felt scrutinized under her stare.

"I had a therapist back at home before coming to school," I started. She nodded with a thoughtful expression.

"And what was this therapist for?"

"Mainly my anger problems," I told her. That was what it started as anyway. It became something different once my therapist about my family and religious trauma.

"So mainly anger," Ms. Rivera said, writing something else on the sheet. "What else?"

"We talked about my problems with my family and, uh, my problems growing up with their religion," I started. "And, um, my uh sexuality."

She nodded, writing again.

"And what are your goals you're hoping to accomplish in therapy?"

"Goals?" I asked.

She looked up from the paper.

"Yes, your goals," Ms. Rivera said. "What you hope to accomplish by going to therapy."

"Um, to get better?"

"It's not really a matter of getting better," she started. "A therapist is not going to make you get better, but they're going to be able to give you the

tools and the skills to help you cope with things and become more self aware."

"Then I guess my goal is to learn how to cope with my emotions better," I began. She looked at me to say more. "To learn how to stop hating myself... and to make positive changes in my life to help me reach those goals."

Ms. Rivera nodded and wrote that down.

"Good. I think those are good goals to start with."

She wrote some more stuff down for a few moments before looking back up at me.

"Is there anything you'd like to discuss before we finish?" she asked.

I shook my head. "No."

"Okay, so what I'm going to do is contact a therapist in the area that is covered by the school health insurance. I'll have them give you a call to set up an appointment. In the meantime, if you ever need a session, you can always make an appointment here. If you need a session urgently, you can give us a call or come directly here and we can get you in immediately, okay?"

I nodded and stood from the chair. "Okay."

Ms. Rivera walked me out of the office and once I was out of the building, I started running back toward my dorm. I knew I would be cutting it close to hockey practice with this appointment, but it was all they had available.

I got my things and ran to the training facility, not even bothering to wait for the bus that could bring me there. When I got there, everyone was already out on the ice. I cursed at myself and got ready faster than I ever had in my life.

As soon as I got out on the ice, Coach Foreman stopped me with a hard expression.

"Reilly, you can see me after practice and explain why you're late."

I nodded and worked myself into the drills they had started.

The last thing I wanted to do was explain to my coach that I needed therapy, but it was inevitable, especially if it was going to cause me to be late to practice.

Hopefully, it wouldn't be an every week thing. When I saw a therapist back home, it was every two weeks. I was hoping I could get away with once a month now. But that all depended on how much help the therapist thought I needed.

When practice ended, I hit the shower and then got back into my street clothes. Coach Foreman was waiting for me in his office when I was done.

I tapped on the door and he motioned for me to come in and close it, then motioned for me to sit down.

"I know I explained at the beginning of the season that I expect everyone to be here on time, every day," he started. "And I especially didn't expect you to ever show up late, so I'm going to need an explanation."

"I had an appointment at the counseling office," I said in a quiet voice. I really didn't want anyone else to hear this. "I knew I would be cutting it close, but I thought I'd make it. That's why I didn't say anything."

He was silent for a moment, his expression giving nothing away. I couldn't tell whether or not he was judging me and that made the situation worse.

"Well," he started. "Is everything alright?"

"Kind of," I replied, looking down at the floor. "They're setting me up with a therapist. I don't know what the schedule is going to be like."

Coach Foreman nodded.

"Alright," he said. "When you know more, let me know if it affects our schedule here. I'm sure we can figure something out so you can get all your

practice in and get to all your appointments."

"Thank you."

I didn't know what else to say. I knew he really couldn't react badly, but I didn't expect him to just accept that I might have to be late to practice sometimes.

"I think you're a really good player, Landon," Coach said. "And I really want to get you to your full potential. That's why I was hard on you about being late at first."

I nodded and stood up from the chair. Coach dismissed me and I sent a quick text to Matthew Hanson to let him know about my counseling appointment. He responded, saying "that's great!" with five smile emojis at the end.

I bypassed the rest of my teammates who were still in the locker room to grab my things. Most of them were looking at me with curious glances after seeing me walk out of Coach Foreman's office. I paid them no mind and left the room.

I got back to my dorm and deflated, finally able to be alone for the rest of the night.

**

Thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter !

22

TRIGGER WARNING: brief mention of suicide

Wren Ridley

His rough hands moved up and down my soft skin, up my back then down to my waist, the sensation burning and sparking something within me. He gripped my waist tightly, pulling me closer so that our stomachs pressed together as his mouth laid open over the skin of my neck, biting and sucking.

I threw my head back, exposing more of my neck to him, and let out a long groan of pleasure.

He was relentless, moving his mouth up my neck, to the center of my throat, and up my jaw. One hand left my waist to grab onto the side of my throat, squeezing lightly. He brought his rough fingers on his other hand down to my hip, then to the side of my leg dangerously close to my back side.

I hissed when he bit down harshly on the skin between my shoulder and neck.

"F... fuck," I cursed, running my hand through my hair.

"You like that don't you?" he asked against my skin, his low voice rumbling.

He bit down on the skin again, then moved his tongue over it.

"Shit... yeah," I responded, letting out a shuddered breath.

He moved his lips up my jaw, but never meeting my mouth. I moved, trying to connect our lips, but he held my head in place.

He shook his head.

"Not yet."

I groaned.

"Say you want me to ruin you," he demanded.

"I want... I want you to ruin me."

He chuckled and continued on my neck. He brought his hand down my stomach, to my front.

"Landon," I moaned. " *Landon."*

He looked at me with a grin, his face so close I thought our lips would touch. He leaned in.

Just as our lips were about to touch, my eyes shot open and I sat up in my empty bed.

"What the actual fuck," I muttered, placing my hand on my head.

It had really gotten to the point where I started dreaming about this guy. I hadn't even spoken to him since he got out of my car the other night, yet he was occupying my mind like he was a phantom haunting me.

"Did you just have a sex dream?" James asked with a yawn, stretching his arms over his head.

"No."

"Who were you dreaming about?" he pushed further. "You can tell me if it was me."

"It was absolutely not."

"That wasn't convincing," James teased. "It's okay. You can have the real thing anytime you want."

"You just want to have sex with me so you stop thinking about Anthony so much," I shot back. It was true even if he refused to admit it.

James set his mouth in a straight line, any teasing gone from his expression. Anytime Anthony was brought up, it hit a sore spot for James and that was exactly what I wanted at that moment.

"You really have to bring him up?" James asked, shaking his head at me. "Fine, then I know your sex dream was about Landon because you said his name. I just didn't want to embarrass you, but now I don't care because you're being a massive asshole."

"I'm not embarrassed," I told him.

"Of course you're not," he said, rolling his eyes. "Have you fucked Landon yet or are you in the stage of just imagining it?"

"Oh, we have passionate rough sex every night."

"And you don't invite me?"

"Why would I?"

I got out of bed and started toward the door to go to the restroom.

"In all seriousness, if you're dreaming about him you should probably just fuck him and get it over with."

I didn't dignify that with a response and left the room, closing the door behind me.

The problem with James's logic was that I wasn't dreaming about Landon because I wanted to have sex with him so badly. It was because what I felt for him was more personal and emotional than that which was something I had never felt for anyone before. And something I shouldn't be feeling for him at all.

I wasn't supposed to get caught up in emotions for someone, especially not for someone I had history with like Landon. Someone who could cause the

breakage of my already fragile relationship with my brother. I should have known something like this was coming. I had spent too long with everything working out for me and something had to give.

I braced my hands on the edge of the sink and stared at myself in the mirror for a moment.

Sometimes I felt like a stranger to myself. This was one of those moments. The rational part of me would never let myself feel anything for anybody. And that was the part I clung to, the part I knew, the part I was comfortable with.

I finished in the bathroom and went back to the bedroom. James was in the middle of getting dressed when I walked in. He glanced at me, raising an eyebrow, but didn't say anything.

The weather outside was cold, dreary, and raining, making the decision for me to stay in my dorm all day instead of going to class a very easy one.

"You're actually going to class today?" I asked James, sitting down at my desk.

"I have to," he said. "I have an exam in one class and if I have one more absence in another the Professor is gonna fail me."

"How unfortunate."

James flipped me off and left the room. When he was gone, I pulled out my laptop and worked on some assignments to submit them early. I was already ahead in most of my classes, so there wasn't many of them for me to do.

I moved onto working on my novel when I was finished with assignments. I had been stuck for days on what to write, my thoughts unable to translate into words on the page. That problem persisted even as I sat at my desk, the page open in front of me.

I read over my words, forcibly stopping myself from back spacing through the whole thing. That was the thing with writing; I was never satisfied when

the end result.

When writing proved to be impossible for me, I moved onto reading which took up most of my day. James had come and gone again in the room with me barely noticing. It wasn't until I received a text on my phone that I put the book down and realized it was already evening.

From: Landon
Are u going home tonight by any chance

To: Landon
It's a Wednesday night.

From: Landon
ya i know
I just need a ride

To: Landon
For what?

He didn't answer, and I knew that meant he was fed up with me. He didn't want me asking questions. He just wanted me to do what he wanted without trying to figure out anything that was going on with him.

I had nothing better to do anyway.

To: Landon
I'll drive you.

From: Landon
I'll find another ride

To: Landon
No, I'll drive you.
I'll be there in five minutes.

Landon didn't answer, but when I pulled up outside his dorm building, he was already standing outside waiting for me. He got in and buckled up without a word.

I raised my eyebrows at him, waiting for some sort of explanation.

"Just drive, we'll talk on the way," he said.

I obliged, driving away from campus. Landon didn't say anything until we were on the highway heading back home.

"I just need you to drop me off," he started. "I'll figure out how I'm getting back later."

"What exactly are you doing?" I asked him. "Is it so important that you have to get there right now?"

It was still raining out, but only enough for a light pitter patter against the windows. It wasn't a heavy,
drenching rain obstructing my view of the road. I glanced over at Landon briefly as he was looking out the window and watching the rain.

"I have to go find my sister," he said after a moment.

"Your sister is missing?"

"Apparently," he muttered, leaning his head against the window. "One of her friends texted me because Livi calls me from her phone sometimes. She said no one knows where she is. My parents have been calling her friends because she left and they don't know where she went."

"Hm," I responded. "None of her friends know her well enough to know where she is?"

"I guess not."

"And you think you know where she is?"

"No," he said.

I glanced at him briefly with a look of judgement.

"I mean I have some ideas," he continued with a glare.

"So your plan is to just have me drive you around aimlessly until we find your sister?"

"No, I told you you just need to drop me off," he retorted.

"So you can walk around aimlessly in the rain?"

"Shut the fuck up, Wren," he snapped. "Don't act like you wouldn't go looking for your sister if no one knew where she was."

"I would," I agreed. "I'll also help you look for your sister, but you never thought to even ask."

He was silent for a moment, mulling over my words.

"Well, I didn't expect you to help me," he finally responded.

"Have I never helped you before?"

"Shut up, Wren, I get it," he said with a scoff.

I grinned. "What do you get?"

" *Shut up* ."

"Tell me," I urged. "Tell me that I'm not nearly as bad of a person that you like to think I am, that you come to me in times like these because you know I'm not that bad."

"I come to you at times like this because you're my only option," he said.

"I'm your first choice," I corrected.

"Only option and first choice are not the same thing."

"There's really not much of a difference."

He flipped me off and we remained silent for the rest of the ride back into town. Landon started directing me places that he thought his sister might be

like this clearing by their house they used to sit in and behind the ice rink she practices at.

He got out of the car and checked in and around the clearing, calling out her name. He went inside the ice rink and couldn't find her there either.

Every time she didn't magically appear in one of these places, he grew more and more nervous. His leg started bouncing so hard it felt like the whole car was shaking with his anxiety.

It got to the point where I finally reached my hand out and placed it on his knee, holding it down from bouncing. His eyes immediately shot over to me.

We were still parked in the ice rink parking lot. The lights were bright and shining into the car, making his face fully visibly to me for the first time that night. He looked tired, his face pulled into a frown, his forehead wrinkled with stress. He didn't look himself. I hated it.

"We're going to find her, so don't get yourself all worked up," I said. "You're a lot cuter when you're not a nervous wreck."

His cheeks grew rosy at that, and he was still looking at me like I was crazy for touching him. It took a few moments for him to snap out of it.

"Don't do that," he said, his mouth frowning once again. Looking at his mouth only reminded me of the dream from this morning, the way his mouth devoured every inch of me.

"Do what?"

"This!" Landon exclaimed, gesturing toward my hand before pushing it off of his leg. "Acting all nice like we're... we're..."

"Like we're into each other?" I finished for him. I could tell by the way embarrassment took over him that I was correct. "Well, we are. Aren't we?"

"No," he instantly replied, the embarrassment vanishing. "We're not."

"Well, I'm into you."

His face flushed again. "Stop!"

I chuckled. "Fine. Where to next?"

He pushed his hair back and left his hand on his head like he was wracking his brain for an answer. Landon let out a loud sigh and pulled at his hair.

"I don't know," he admitted, sounding both angry and defeated.

"Is there any other friend she'd be with?"

"No, all her friends are friends with each other. If one of them knew, all of them would know."

"What about a boyfriend or something?"

His eyes widened. "Jimmy Murphy."

"What?"

"This guy on the hockey team she might be seeing," he said. "I don't really know though."

"Well, do you know where this kid lives?"

He sighed. "No."

Before I could say anything, Landon's phone started ringing. I glanced over at the screen as he picked it up and saw that the number wasn't saved. He answered anyway.

"Hello?" he said.

He listened to whoever was on the line.

"You're where?" He paused. "Okay. Stay right there. I'm on my way."

He hung up the phone and looked over at me.

"That was Livi," he told me.

"Okay, where is she?"

"She's at the gas station off of Woodland Ave."

"That's like a twenty minute drive," I said, putting the car in reverse to pull out of the parking lot.

"I know," he replied. "I have no idea how she got there."

Landon was a lot calmer now that he knew where Olivia was, but I knew he wouldn't be happy until she was here in the car with us. He didn't speak the whole way there until we finally pulled in and saw her standing at the door of the gas station convenience store.

"Olivia!" he shouted after he put the window down.

She heard his voice and ran over to the car, opening up the back door and getting in. Olivia was soaking wet from the rain and her shoes and ankles were muddy. She had makeup smearing on her face. It looked like she had been living outside. I bit my tongue, forcing myself not to say anything about how she was making my car filthy.

"What the fuck happened?" Landon asked her, turning around to face his sister.

"Where do I even fucking begin?" she asked, wiping her hands down her face.

I stayed silent in the driver's seat, looking at her through the rear view mirror.

"Mom and I got into a fight about my diet," she started. "Dad was trying to calm us down, but I was so pissed off so I told Mom that I fucking hate her and she's making me want to kill myself, which isn't true but I wanted to make her feel bad."

She paused and let out a small screech before continuing.

"So of course they got all concerned because I said that and started looking through my phone thinking they would find some evidence that I was planning on killing myself or something I don't know," Olivia continued. "And they saw a text to Ella that I wanted to call you from her phone tomorrow."

"So Dad got all pissy at me and took away my phone and told me I'm not going to school tomorrow and that they're checking me into a hospital for a psyche evaluation," she said. "They were literally going to put me on suicide watch."

I glanced at Landon, but his attention was fully on his sister. I knew Landon must've had some messed up family life, but I didn't expect it to be so bad that his parents would be angry at his sister for contacting them.

"So I ran off to Jimmy's and then we got in a fight because he was being an asshole and not listening to me," Olivia continued. "And then I left his house and walked all the way here in the rain because I don't want to go home and I didn't want Mom and Dad to find me at any of my friends houses. Anyway who is this?"

"Jesus Christ, Olivia," Landon said once she was done, ignoring her question. "Are you trying to get yourself kicked out?"

"Is he your boyfriend?" she asked.

I couldn't stop my laughter while Landon glared at me briefly before turning back to his sister.

"Forget about him," he snapped.

Olivia rolled her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I don't care if they kick me out," she said. "In fact, I hope they do!"

Landon turned around in his seat, letting out a long, frustrated groan. He placed his head in his hands, elbows resting on his knees. Olivia and I

shared a look before looking back at him.

"Okay, so where am I going?" I asked him.

He looked up at me and let out a deep breath.

"Take us to the Hansons, I have to grab something," he said and I put the car back in drive.

"So you're really not going to tell me who this is?" Olivia asked.

"It doesn't fucking matter who he is, Olivia," Landon said through gritted teeth.

"Don't 'Olivia' me. You've done it enough tonight."

"I'm Wren," I told her. "Your brother's chauffeur apparently."

Olivia laughed, but didn't say anything else.

Landon didn't say a word when we got to the Hanson's house. He just got out of the car and walked inside.

"So, you and Landon really aren't dating?" Olivia asked once he was out of the car.

I turned to face her. "No."

"I just worry that he's alone all the time," she said. She looked so filthy. I'd have to make Landon clean out my car.

"He's not," I assured her.

I pulled a pen and a napkin out of my glove box and wrote down my phone number before handing it to her.

"Here's my number," I said. "In case you can't get a hold of him. Or if you need anything."

Her eyes widened slightly. "Oh. Thanks."

Landon came back out a moment later. When he got in the car, he turned and handed Olivia what looked to be like an old iPod.

"What the hell is that?" Landon asked, gesturing toward the napkin in his sister's hand.

"Wren's number," she responded with a smirk. "Now, if I can't call you, I can call him to get to you."

Landon looked at me. His expression was soft and it was the one time I couldn't decipher what it meant. His eyes were slightly wide and his mouth was open just a little. I looked away, feeling uncomfortable with his sudden attention.

"Anyway, what the hell is this?" Olivia asked her brother, breaking the tension between us.

He turned back to her. "It's my old iPod. You can connect it to wifi and text me from it so Mom and Dad don't know you're talking to me."

"Where are we taking you now?" I asked Olivia, looking at her through the rear view mirror."

"My friend Ella's. I'll tell you how to get there," she replied. "I'm sure Mom and Dad already called her looking for me, so they won't call again."

I could feel Landon's eyes on me after we dropped Olivia off and the whole way to the high way. I ignored it until I couldn't take it anymore.

"I know I'm handsome, but do you have to keep staring at me?" I asked him, glancing over briefly.

He didn't even get annoyed with me.

"You're being weird," he said.

"How weird?"

"You're just being nice," he said. "You were nice to my sister."

"Sorry, I didn't know you wanted me to be mean to her," I said. "I should've been with how filthy she made the back seat."

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't actually," I said. "I'm generally a nice person, you've said it yourself."

"You're..." he trailed and paused for a moment. He was still staring at me and it took everything in me to keep my eyes on the road. "You're insufferable."

"And *you're* cleaning my car tomorrow."

He scoffed and finally took his eyes off of me to look out the window.

And I spent the rest of the ride trying to ignore the tension between us.

**

Thanks for reading! Please let me know what you thought of the chapter:)

23

Landon Reilly

The door opened the second I knocked on it, revealing James who was disheveled and in a rush. His hair was messy, his clothes weren't on straight, and seeing him like that made me sick to my stomach. I couldn't help but wonder why he looked like that, if he was just rushing or if he had been in bed with Wren. The sight of him made me want to turn around and never come back.

The two of us stood face to face for a moment before James patted me on the shoulder and moved around me, not saying anything. I couldn't tell if that was a good sign or not.

I sighed and walked through the open door to find Wren sitting at his desk on his laptop. He looked put together unlike James. His bed was made whereas James's was a mess, the comforter hanging off and onto the floor.

"What are you doing?" Wren asked, pulling my attention from James's bed to him. His lips were quirked up slightly, almost in a smirk. Wren looked over to James's bed then back to me, raising his eyebrows. He knew what I was thinking. I know he did.

Wren was about to say something else, but I abruptly cut him off.

"Are you hooking up with James?" I blurted without thinking. There was no taking it back now, no denying that I had been thinking about the two of them, that it had been bothering me

"Wow," Wren said with a grin. "I didn't think you'd actually say it, but you surprised me."

"Forget it," I replied, shaking my head. I turned to leave, but Wren got up from his chair and grabbed my arm, stopping me.

"The last time I hooked up with James was to forget about you," he said in a low voice.

I turned to face him with a frown.

"Don't fucking say that," I said.

"Why?" he asked. "You don't want me to tell you the truth? You don't want to know that it didn't even work and I haven't touched him since?"

"Stop." My voice was quiet and weak.

"Fine," he said, releasing me. "What are you actually here for then? It can't be to interrogate me about James."

I rolled my eyes. I couldn't even look at him. I was embarrassed and I wanted to leave. He wouldn't let me get away with that though.

"I came to clean your car," I muttered, looking anywhere but him. I could see his grin out of the corner of my eye.

"You were actually going to clean my car?" I could hear the amusement in his voice.

He touched me again. This time his hand was on my shoulder, his thumb brushing the skin on the side of my neck. I shivered as his thumb moved across my skin.

I finally looked back at him. He was giving me his full attention with an expression I couldn't decipher. His head was tilted slightly downward and his eyes were gazing up at me. His face was both soft and intense at the same time.

"You were nice to Olivia," I muttered.

"Hm," Wren hummed. "And you wanted to repay me?"

I nodded.

"Well, I already cleaned it," he said. "So you'll have to think of something else. I know there's something we both want."

It took me a moment to figure out what he meant, but when I did realize, my nerves shot through the roof. The look he was giving me was one of desire. I knew what he wanted and I knew he would refuse to make the first move.

I grabbed the front of his shirt and glared at the smirk he gave me.

"You're annoying," I said, walking him backwards toward the wall.

He nodded. "I know."

"And horrible."

He nodded again. "Yeah."

"And irritating." I had him up against the wall now.

He hummed in agreement.

Wren had his head back against the wall while I leaned in, so close our noses were nearly touching.

"And stupid," I said, my voice quieter as I leaned in closer to say it into his ear.

"I really am," he replied.

My mouth moved to the other side of his face, my lips nearly grazing his jaw and cheek.

"And so... insufferable."

He hummed in agreement again.

I moved my mouth right over his. Wren didn't move. I knew he wouldn't. He meant it when he said I would have to make the first move. He would

probably stand here all day until I let my mouth fall on top of his.

I couldn't let myself think about it any longer. We were here. I put us in this position. If I thought about it too much, I would back away and leave us both disappointed.

Our breathing was in sync. I was standing so close to him that I felt the rise and fall of his chest against my own. Wren looked down at my lips then back into my eyes with the most intense stare I had ever seen from him.

His lips looked welcoming and ready. They were slightly parted, anticipating my own to take them, caress them, move with them.

Wren bit down on his bottom lip and I all but melted right there on the spot.

"I can't fucking stand you," I said before lowering my mouth onto his, my hands still gripping the front of his shirt like I would lose my balance if I let go.

The kiss was slow at first with me doing most of the work. Wren let me set the pace and once I had, he responded, moving his lips with mine. His breath hitched as I bit down on his bottom lip then soothed it with my kiss.

"Put my hands where you want them," Wren said against my lips, refusing to break the kiss.

Until that point I hadn't realized that Wren had kept his hands at his sides, waiting for my direction.

I let go of his shirt and grabbed his hands, placing them low on my waist. He gripped me tightly, pulling my hips against his. My hands found their way to his jaw, holding him there. I put a little pressure on his neck and Wren let out a sensual moan that almost made me moan in response.

He was hot. He was so hot. And it pained me that I couldn't look at him like this, that in order to see him completely I would have to take my mouth off his and I wasn't willing to do that.

I had never kissed like this, with so much want, desire, and passion. Every other kiss before this had been superficial. It had been a way to try to feel something, a way to try to change myself.

This was me giving in, embracing myself and who I was. There was nothing in my mind other than Wren and his lips on mine. My father's voice was silenced and he couldn't bear witness to this, couldn't make me feel like I was disgusting and wrong. Because there couldn't be anything wrong with this, not with how right it felt.

Wren's hands moved over my ass, squeezing me and pulling me closer.

Our mouths opened for each other, tongues meeting.

We could've been there for hours or minutes, I didn't know. Time didn't matter, didn't make sense.

We finally pulled apart, but only briefly. Wren looked at me before moving his mouth to my neck and jaw. I was breathing heavy, hissing when his teeth grazed my skin. I buried my hand in his hair, reveling in the sounds he made when I pulled it.

Wren pulled away from me and let out a deep breath, resting his head back against the wall. He didn't release me, and my hands stayed where they were. It was like we couldn't bear the thought of no longer touching.

"I knew you couldn't resist me," Wren said.

I scoffed and rolled my eyes, pushing off of him and backing away.

"Shut the hell up," I shot back.

Wren stepped forward and kissed me again.

The two of us ended up on his bed, making out for I don't know how long.

***

Wren Ridley

I saw Landon more often now. Ever since that day in my room we had been seeing each other every day and making out almost every time.

I was sitting in the coffee shop with my laptop open, my latte sitting in front of me while Landon's coffee sat across from me, holding his place until he arrived. Anthony had given me a look when I ordered Landon's coffee, but he didn't say anything and I ignored him.

Landon walked in a few minutes later. He stopped up at the counter and exchanged a few words with Anthony before making his way over to our usual spot. I looked back at my computer screen before he realized I had been watching him.

"I don't need you to buy my coffee," he said as he sat down, but there was no sharpness in his voice. He spoke normally like we were discussing the weather.

I shrugged, glancing at him over the laptop screen. He stared at me with raised eyebrows, the coffee in his hand.

"Sorry, is buying you things a dealbreaker?" I asked.

Landon sipped his coffee, glancing at me over the rim of the cup and not bothering to respond.

"What are you doing tonight?" I asked him.

"Hockey practice until six," he replied.

"And after?"

"I guess that depends on you."

I grinned. "Does it?"

Landon sighed, leaning back in his seat. It had been like this for days, him acting like he wanted nothing to do with me but still making the time anyway. He would act like he couldn't stand me but later on he'd be under me or on top of me any way. I couldn't say I didn't like it.

As long as I ignored the fact that my brother would kill me if he ever found out I was involved with Landon, the whole hard to get attitude actually made the whole situation more fun.

It wasn't like this was something Fox would ever find out about anyway.

"I'm busy after practice actually," Landon said with an irritated expression.

I shook my head. "Don't be like that, Lance. You can come right on over after practice. How about that?"

Landon scoffed. "And if I don't want to?"

"You do though, don't you?"

Landon was getting flustered. He couldn't meet my eyes. He was nervously drumming his fingers on the table, and his leg was bouncing underneath it.

I reached across the table and put my hand over his, causing his fingers to stop and his eyes to shoot over to our hands, then up to my face.

"I'll see you tonight, right?" I asked.

Landon nodded, pressing his lips together tightly.

Later on that day, Stella, Jess, and James were sitting around my dorm room while I was reading up on my bed. I checked the time and it was getting closer to six.

"You're going to have to move this over to your room," I told Stella. She looked up at me with a strange expression from her place on the floor.

"Why?"

"He probably just wants to jack off," James cut in.

"No, I just want some peace and quiet," I replied.

"To jack off," James added.

" *Or* ," Stella started. "He has someone coming over. "Who is it? Is it that guy from the library the other day? The one who was checking you out?"

"I have no idea who you're talking about."

"Yeah you do," she said. "I pointed him out. The one with the long curly hair."

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"So it is him," Stella said with a wide grin like she caught red handed.

I shook my head and checked my phone to see a text from Landon.

From: Landon

On my way

"You all have to get out now," I told them, closing my book and putting it off to the side.

"All of us?" James asked. "This is my room too!"

"Didn't ask," I said, motioning toward the door.

James let out a loud groan and got up from his desk chair, following the girls toward the door.

"You owe me," James said, pointing at me from the door way.

"Out."

James shut the door behind them, and once they were gone I picked up my book again and read until there was a knock on the door.

I opened the door to reveal a freshly showered Landon. His hair was still damp and he smelled like a fresh soap. He looked me up and down with his dark eyes before I pulled him inside by the front of his shirt.

As soon as the door was closed, he was against it and my lips were on him. Landon immediately responded to my kiss, cupping my jaw with his hands while I gripped his waist.

He started walking me backward toward my bed and laid me on top of it. Landon pulled away only for a moment to get onto the bed and hover over me before retaking my lips with his. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer to me and running one of my hands through the hair on the back of his head.

We made out like this for a little while until Landon pulled away and rolled off, lying down by my side. His eyes were closed when I looked over at him. As if being to sense my stare, they opened slightly to meet mine.

"Are you just done or are you freaking out in your head?" I asked him, propping my head up with one hand.

"Can it be both?"

"I suppose it can."

He sighed and looked over at me.

"This is fucking crazy, you realize that right?" he asked.

"Sure."

He sighed again, pressing his palms into his eyes. I placed my hand on his chest, tracing circles over the fabric of his t-shirt.

Landon always seemed to wear his emotions on his sleeve, but he hadn't yet lashed out at me over our new predicament. It was only a matter of time and I couldn't tell if I should have been bracing myself at that moment.

"I can't really tell if you're going to punch me or not," I said, causing Landon to remove his hands from his eyes and look over at me incredulously.

"Seriously?"

"I never know with you."

"I'm not going to punch you," he said, sitting up slightly. "There's just too much wrong with this and I don't want to think about it."

"So don't think about it." And I wouldn't think about it either. As long as neither of us thought about it for too long and talked ourselves out of this, it would be fine.

"It's not that easy," he said before letting out a yawn.

He settled into my bed, propping himself up with one of my pillows. I could tell he was dozing off by the way his breathing evened out. His eyes were still open, but they were growing heavy, slowly opening and shutting like he was trying to keep himself awake.

Landon eventually did fall asleep next to me, his head tilting to the side and resting on my shoulder.

I read my book while he slept until I dozed off myself, feeling the warmth of having somebody beside me.

**

So there's been some kissing :)

Let me know what you thought of the chapter !

24

Landon Reilly

When I entered my room on Friday night after my hockey game, the last thing I expected to see was Wren sitting on my bed, shoes off, reading through one of my text books, but that was the sight that greeted me.

"How the fuck did you even get in here?" I asked, closing the door behind me and dropping my bag beside my closet.

I had gotten pushed around a lot on the ice tonight. My body ached and all I wanted to do was get in bed and finish up a paper I had due at midnight. But of course he always had to throw a wrench in my plans.

"Kyle let me in on his way out," Wren replied, not even bothering to look up at me. He was reading through my philosophy text book, clearly engrossed with whatever page he was on.

"And you're here because...?"

"Well, I'm supposed to get you to come out tonight, Stella's orders," he explained. "But I wouldn't mind staying in. It's not like Stella and Jess would notice if we were there anyway."

Jess would absolutely notice I was there considering the fact the last time I spoke to her I snapped at her and told her we weren't friends. But it wasn't like Wren knew that.

"I'm not going out tonight," I told him, sitting on the edge of my desk. "And you can't be here either. I have to do homework."

"You actually do your homework?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, considering a stipulation of my sports scholarship is that I maintain decent grades."

"What constitutes as decent? C?" He shot me a look of disbelief.

I shrugged. "It's passing."

"It's mediocre."

Wren closed the book and got off the bed, opening my laptop that lay on the desk.

"What are you doing?" I asked, pushing off the desk and turning to face him.

"If you're aiming for a C, then you clearly need someone else to look at your work."

"You're not looking at my work."

I felt stupid enough around Wren, I didn't need to subject myself to seeing how much smarter than me he actually was without even trying. It was like a natural gift to him and his academics were important. For me, hockey was what was important while academics came second. I didn't need to put in full effort as long as my grades were good enough to keep my scholarship and keep me on the team. We had different priorities.

"Seriously, you have to go," I told him with a sigh. "I need to get this done. I have to leave early tomorrow for an away game."

"Just let me look at it," he pestered.

I groaned and leaned over to unlock my laptop. Wren shot me a satisfied grin.

"You're the most irritating person I've ever met, you know that?" I said as he took a seat on my desk chair.

"You can act like you're bothered by me all you want, but I know it's not true."

He hovered over one of the assignments open on my computer and glanced at me as if asking if it was the right one. I nodded and he opened it, taking time to read through the whole thing. When he was done, he immediately started typing.

"Wait," I said, putting my hand over his to stop him. "What are you doing?"

"I'm fixing it," he said, not looking away from the screen.

"I don't need you to fix it."

"You do actually," he said. "You're not citing things correctly and your sentences are too long."

I tried not to let the embarrassment show, so I looked away from him, glaring at the blank wall beside my bed.

Wren spent the next few minutes working on my paper, the sound of his typing drifting through the room. When he was finished, he tapped on my leg for me to look. I didn't notice much of a difference on the screen.

"What did you even do?" I asked. "That's the same as it was."

"No, it's not," Wren replied. "I corrected your citations and fixed the grammar and sentences. It'll make it at least go up a letter grade."

I gave him a blank stare.

"Maybe I'll do something nice for you if you finish it right now," Wren said after a moment, standing up from the desk.

"I don't want you to do anything nice for me," I grumbled, sitting down where Wren once was.

He put his hand on my shoulder, brushing his thumb against my neck as he leaned down to speak into my ear.

"Don't be like that," he whispered. "We both know you're lying anyway."

I shivered as he moved away, sitting back on my bed and flipping through my book once again.

It was hard to concentrate with Wren in the room, though I knew he wasn't paying any attention to me. I didn't like that he was behind me, that I couldn't see what he was doing. Every time I turned to steal a glance at him, he was in the same position propped up against my pillows with my philosophy text book in his lap.

When I finally did finish my paper, Wren knew instantly.

"You're done?" he asked. I nodded. "Let me see."

"You don't need to see," I snapped, saving my work and submitting it before he could do anything about it then spun around to face him.

Wren shrugged. "Fine. It's your grade."

"Yeah, it is my grade," I said, narrowing my eyes at him. "Did you get your fix of annoying me for the night or is there more?"

Wren grinned. "You're wound up really tight tonight. I can take care of that if you'd like."

Two parts of me were at odds. One part of me wanted to kick him out of the room and go to sleep, trying to forget he was even here to begin with. The other part, the stronger part, wanted to experience whatever it was he was offering.

This was the problem with getting involved with Wren. I hated him, wanted nothing to do with him, but I couldn't keep myself away. I hated him but I wanted him. He infuriated me at the same time he pleased me. The whole situation was contradictory and I had no idea what to think about it.

"Get up on the bed," Wren lightly demanded.

I got up from the desk chair but stopped myself short of getting on the bed like he wanted. I hated myself for almost obeying him.

"You're so..." I started.

"I know. I'm annoying and infuriating and insufferable," he finished for me. "I probably missed a couple, but I'm well versed on that. Would you like me to blow you or not?"

I nearly choked on air at his words. He looked at me expectantly, like he didn't just say something vulgar.

I was torn between pushing him out of here and just giving in. I never thought about going this far with Wren, about letting him see me so intimately. That was the scariest part about it, letting him see me so vulnerable. That and the fact that I didn't know if I could handle this, if I could keep my mind from going to a dark place.

We were silent for a moment, Wren staring at me while I stared at the empty spot on the bed I was meant to occupy. Wren looked like he was about to say something, so without thinking about it any further, I hopped up on the bed.

He raised his eyebrows at me, looking both surprised and satisfied.

Wren started by kissing me. He had his legs on either side of my hips, sitting in my lap as he brought his lips lightly down onto mine. His kiss was soft and freeing, like it was sucking my anxieties about the situation right out of me. My hands found their way to his hips on their own accord, going underneath his shirt and resting on his bare skin.

Wren's tongue popped out to meet mine and there was something so new about this sensation that I couldn't pinpoint. I had been kissed before, but his kiss was always different, always feeling like something else.

His lips moved down to my neck while his hands moved to my chest. I let out a content sigh, resting my head back against the wall with my eyes closed. It didn't make sense to me that the person who frustrated me and pushed my buttons the most was also the one that could relax me like this. My brain was filled with hundreds of different conflicting emotions about Wren.

His lips traveled from my neck to my jaw, then to my collarbone while his hands moved lower and lower on my body. Throughout this kiss, I had forgotten about what Wren was intending to do with me, but I became hyper aware of it when his lips left my body and he moved down on the bed so he would have better access to me.

Wren looked at me with raised eyebrows as he put his hands on the button of my jeans. He did nothing to undress me until I nodded at him. Then the button was popped open and the zipper pulled down. Wren pulled my pants down over my thighs but left my boxers on as he kissed up my stomach and to my chest then back down again.

"Do you want this?" Wren asked, his lips just below my navel.

I nodded at him and he shook his head with a grin.

"I'm going to need you to tell me you want it," Wren said, looking up at me.

I sighed. "Wren..."

"If you want it badly enough, you'll tell me," he replied, looking wicked and evil as he did. "Tell me you want me to suck your cock and consider it done."

I let out another sigh, wincing at his words. This should have been enough to snap me out of my bliss, to make me sit up and shove him off. I didn't need this from him, I didn't need it from anyone. But I looked down at him, saw the hunger in his eyes, the want and desire as he sat before me. And I knew we both wanted this as bad as the other. The tension between us was unbearable and this was how we could relieve it.

"I want you to," I started, grimacing at the vulgarity of his words.

It was hard for me to get the rest of the words out. It wasn't like I had never been vulgar in my life. I had plenty of times, but never with another man, never acting on the impulses that I was taught to ignore and fight against. But I had to say it out loud, not only because I knew I would lose in a battle

of wills against Wren, but because I needed to be able to say it for myself, to move myself further into self acceptance.

"I want you to suck my cock, Wren," I said in a low tone. His eyes darkened, the hunger and desire in them increasing monumentally.

He pulled down my boxers and started stroking me, instantly filling me with pleasure. My breathing grew heavier as I watched his hand go over me again and again.

When his warm mouth welcomed me in, I jolted and let out a groan. My hands found their way into his hair, pulling him onto me with force. When he gagged, I instantly let go of him but he pulled off and shook his head, tugging my hands back to his hair before putting his mouth back on me.

Wren liked this just as much as I did. He moaned as I pulled on his hair, as I held his head against me and prevented him from moving, making him gag. He loved it and so did I. I loved seeing his wide eyes watering as he looked up at me with his mouth wrapped around me. There was something so sensational about having someone with such a loud and smart mouth look up at me like this.

When I finished, Wren kept his mouth on me, swallowing everything. He sucked on me until I winced and then pulled off, looking up a me with a wide, boastful grin. He pulled my pants back up for me and came to lay beside me.

I was still panting slightly when he laid his head on my shoulder, pulling my arm around him.

"Don't you want..." I began to ask, but Wren shook his head.

"That was all I needed right now," he said.

I expected to feel shame after the fact. I had thought I wouldn't even be able to look at Wren, that I would want him out of my presence as soon as it was over. But I didn't feel any of that. He lay beside me and I didn't feel revulsion.

"Stop shaking your leg," Wren said, placing his hand on my thigh that I hadn't even realized was moving.

My hands had somehow found their way back into Wren's hair, this time only twirling it against my fingers.

"Are you getting ready to kick me out?" Wren asked, his tone playful. But I knew he thought that was a possibility, that he was just lying there waiting to be screamed at and thrown out.

"No."

"Well, can you at least tell me what you're thinking?"

"No."

"Lance, if you hated it just tell me. I promise I won't be offended," he started. "Although, I don't know how you could. I give amazing head and you seemed to enjoy it when you were coming down my-"

"Shut up," I snapped, tugging forcefully enough on his hair for him to wince. "Do you have to ruin everything with your big mouth?"

Wren smirked. "Well, now you know one way to really shut me up."

I scoffed. "You're insane."

"That's a new one."

I felt heat rise to my face, but I felt far less embarrassed about Wren having my dick in his mouth than I thought I would. Maybe going to therapy had really been helping my anger and self acceptance even in such a short period of time.

Wren and I didn't speak for the rest of the night and I fell asleep with his head on my shoulder.

***

I woke up to my alarm at six in the morning, Wren's head still on my shoulder and my hand still in his hair. He had turned on his side some time during the night, his legs tangled with mine, his arm wrapped around my torso. He stirred at the sound of the alarm, blinking at me. I pulled my hand from his hair and tapped on his waist, willing him to untangle himself from me so that I could get out of bed. Wren rolled onto his back and watched as I left the bed.

I had to be at our team practice facility for seven for the team breakfast, then we had to leave the school by eight to head toward our away game at Quinnipiac to be there for ten and get in some practice before the game at one.

I left Wren in the room while I did what I needed in the bathroom. By the time I walked back into the room, my bed was made and Wren was up wearing one of my hockey sweatshirts.

"Hope you don't mind that I borrowed this," he said, looking down at the sweatshirt. "It's chilly out there this morning."

I clenched my jaw as I looked at him. I didn't like him in my clothes or making my bed. He just always had to command a situation even when it didn't seem like he was doing it. He was weird and bizarre and I didn't know what to think of him. He was unlike anyone I had ever known.

"Whatever," I muttered, starting to gather my things. "You need to go now."

When I said it, Wren was already moving toward the door. I didn't know why that made my stomach feel hollow. It felt better to be the one kicking him out rather than him being the one leaving.

"Last night was fun," Wren said as he opened the door. "We should do it again sometime." Then he was gone.

I watched the door in confusion for a moment. I didn't get how he could be so nonchalant, how he could do what we did last night and have it not matter in the slightest.

That was one of my fears when it came to Wren; that this would always mean more to me than it ever did to him. Everything we did would be something new for me while for him it was something he had experienced a hundred times. This was only fun for him because I was some sort of game to him, someone who played hard to get, someone who had no idea what he was doing.

I blocked out thoughts of last night as I finished getting ready and went to the team breakfast. I was one of the first people there besides the coaches and Rojas, who were standing in the corner of the room chatting. When they saw me, they immediately stopped and waved me over.

"Just the player we wanted to see," Coach Foreman said as I made my way over to them.

"Oh, is everything okay?" I asked, feeling anxious. The Coaches and Rojas didn't look like they were about to deliver me bad news, but I still felt sick at the thought of them talking about me without me being there.

"Shea is out today," Coach Foreman replied, referencing one of Rojas's linemates. "Nothing major. He's sick and can't play today. How do you feel about moving up to play Rojas's left wing?"

I was a natural center, as were many of the players who were forced onto wings when they got onto teams with better centers than them. I was lucky to keep my position as center in college, though I was rotating between third and fourth line. Playing on the first line was something I had always done, but never as a winger. This would be my only chance to play first line while Rojas was still on the team, even if I had to play a different position than what I was used to.

"I could do that," I said, glancing over at smiling Chris Rojas.

"Great," he said, clapping me on the shoulder. "You're going to do great."

The rest of the team filed into the room for breakfast shortly after and the lines were announced while we ate. First line had Rojas in the center with his usual right wing and me on the left. Cooper ended up getting my usual

spot as center on the fourth line. He didn't get to play as often as I did, but when he did get to play it was usually as a winger on one of the bottom two lines, meaning when he was playing, I was usually having to play with him.

The thought of Cooper getting my place made my stomach turn. This made there be a possibility that they would permanently replace me with him and I could be the one shoved onto someone's wing.

I shoveled the rest of my food into my mouth and glared over at him.

As soon as we were let on the bus, I took a seat for myself, put my headphones in, and ignored my surroundings for the duration of the drive.

**

Thanks for reading! Please let me know what you thought of the chapter :)

Also, does anyone remember which On Thin Ice character plays hockey at Quinnipiac? :)

25

Landon Reilly

I was too busy glaring at Cooper talking with my usual line mates to hear Rojas call out for me the first time. It wasn't until he raised his voice and shook my shoulder that I turned to face him.

"You good?" he asked, staring intensely into my eyes.

"Yeah," I answered quickly. "I'm fine."

"Don't be nervous about switching it up," he said. "Change is good and it's going to make you an even better player, so don't sweat it."

He lightly punched my shoulder and started us on some drills for warm ups.

I found myself having to focus more on my movements, having to stop myself from moving center, looking to Rojas for direction. Usually I had no problem focusing on hockey, but there was too much going on in my head at once to keep my thoughts on the task at hand.

Whatever I had going on with Wren was stuck in my mind all the time, and sometimes my father's voice found its way back to me. It was mostly random. I wouldn't even be thinking about Wren and then suddenly I heard my father telling me how disgusting I was for letting another man touch me. Sometimes I felt myself agreeing with him.

Now I had Cooper replacing me on my line and all the anger and resentment that came with that.

Then, of course, the game started and I came face to face with someone I didn't expect to see on the ice. One of Elijah's old teammates, Ian, was on the opposing team, and I would have believed that he didn't recognize me if it wasn't for the side ways glances he kept throwing my way and the stare down every time I skated by their bench.

So that was another thing for my mind to dwell on. Ian being here, a physical reminder of all I had done to Elijah and everything that had happened last year.

I didn't remember much about that night I was drunk and stumbled my way to Micah's house, but when he had told me about it afterwards, he said Elijah and Ian were there which only added to my embarrassment. Ian, someone I barely even knew, saw me at my most vulnerable, and now I had to face him.

And he wasn't going easy on me.

Every check was deliberate and rough. He sent me right into the boards every chance he got. He stole the puck from me whenever it was on my stick. I was all the motivation he needed to play the best hockey of his life.

Ian wouldn't let me get a shot on net. He blocked me, crowded me, made me miserable on the ice. That was just what he wanted. Although he didn't look smug, I could tell he was enjoying tormenting me.

"That number 77 seems like he's out for blood with you," Rojas said from beside me on the bench, squirting water into his mouth.

"Yeah, we sort of know each other," I muttered, glaring out at the ice.

"Okay, so give it back to him," Rojas said. "Don't let him push you around. That gives him the advantage."

On our next shift, I took Rojas's advice. When Ian came for me, I passed off the puck and put force into our collision which made him stumble back. He barely spared me a glance before taking off toward where I sent the puck.

However, the next time he came after me, he caught me off guard and sent me flying face first into the boards. The refs' whistles blew and I looked back to see one of my teammates shoving Ian.

"You good?" Rojas asked, bending down to talk to me.

I nodded and took his out stretched hand to let him help me up.

I watched as Ian skated over to the penalty box, earning himself two minutes for boarding and putting us on the power play.

Coach Foreman had called us off the ice for the first half of the power play to give us some time to rest up. Then, for the last half, we were on the ice. And without Ian and his personal attacks, I could actually move with the puck.

I took a pass from Rojas as we entered the offensive zone. The two of us passed back and forth until I saw an opening and shot the puck, resulting in a goal. My teammates engulfed me in a celebratory hug as I watched Ian stand from the penalty bench, shaking his head.

Ian and I didn't meet again on the ice until the next period, and that was when the fists started flying.

I was skating up ice with the puck, Ian close behind me. Knowing he was catching up to me, I moved my legs faster and searched for one of my teammates to pass it off to. Ian was with me before I could get rid of it, and he slammed into me, his elbow smashing under my chin and sending a wave of pain through me.

He didn't even get called for the blatant elbow, which caused an uproar from my team's bench.

Frustrated, in pain, and angry, I went after Ian. He had turned around back toward our end of the ice. I used all my strength to catch up to him and check him hard before he got rid of the puck. I hit him with so much force that he stumbled and lost the puck, one of my teammates retrieving it.

Instead of getting off the ice like his coach was directing, Ian came over to me and shoved my shoulders.

Part of me knew this was inevitable the way the two of us had been playing. There was only so much anger one could let out through a few hard checks and some shoves. And since he started it, I was now angry, and I still wasn't all that great at dealing with my anger, especially not during a game.

Hockey was physical and rough. There was no way for me to clear my head during the game without getting physical. It seemed Ian felt the same way because, soon our gloves and helmets were off and our fists were flying.

I couldn't really explain why I had suddenly gotten so angry. I should have been able to handle being pushed around a little on the ice. Maybe it was the fact that he was targeting me. Maybe it was the fact that it was Ian and I didn't understand why he had some personal vendetta against me other than the fact that he was friends with Fox and Elijah. Or maybe it was a mix of all of that and the embarrassment of knowing he had seen me at my worst.

It didn't matter though because it was too late to reign any of that anger in.

Ian got one good punch in, but it was like he wasn't really trying to hurt me. The two of us didn't exchange any words as the fight progressed. I grabbed onto the front of his jersey, pulling him to me as I released my fist onto his face.

I hadn't even heard the whistle get blown before the refs were pulling us apart and sending us off the ice and toward our locker rooms.

I picked my gloves and helmet off the ice and went down the tunnel to the locker room, not even bothering to spare a glance at my teammates, though I could hear them cheering me on and tapping their sticks against the boards. They were happy about this fight, but my coaches certainly wouldn't be. I could kiss the first line goodbye after that, maybe even my spot on the team.

Once I was back in the locker room, I threw my helmet and gloves down in front of my locker space. My knuckles were already starting to bruise and they ached as I undressed. I threw my pads down, along with my jersey and my skates and then the rest of my uniform before grabbing a towel and heading toward the showers. Throwing things hadn't done much to get the rest of my anger out of my system.

The hot shower calmed me down a bit, relaxed my muscles, gave me time to clear my head. I could have stayed in there forever and been content.

But when I turned the water off and got out, I was cold and all the thoughts I was trying to avoid came back. I went into this game unsettled because of my line change and the fact that Cooper was replacing me, and everything just spiraled from there because of Ian and my inability to keep my emotions in check. I also always had thoughts of whatever I had going on with Wren lingering in my mind at all times which did nothing to settle me.

I got dressed and started putting away everything I had thrown on the floor. The game must have almost been over at this point and I wanted to be ready to get the hell out of here when they were done.

"Listen," a voice said from behind me, startling me. I whipped around and jumped back, hitting the back of my head on the locker. Ian was standing in front of me with a blank expression, a dark bruise forming on his cheek.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I snapped, rubbing the back of my head. He looked unamused, like I was inconveniencing him even though he was the one that walked in here in the first place.

"Listen, I didn't mean to start a fight with you," Ian continued.

I scoffed, standing up straighter. "Get the fuck out of here."

"I didn't mean to start a fight with you, but I'm glad I did," he said. "Consider it payback for the Masters Tournament last year."

That was the tournament we had gotten kicked out of because of me. Because my father wanted me to injure their best players and I couldn't go through with it. All that anger and resentment was with me on the ice. I was practically a ticking time bomb then. One off hand comment from Fox and I exploded.

"Is that all?" I asked. I didn't know Ian that well, but he didn't seem like much of a talker. Neither was I, really.

"I don't like hitting people," he replied.

"So you came in here to make yourself feel justified for hitting me? Fine, you can go now."

Ian shrugged and looked around the room, making no move to leave.

"I guess that's why," Ian said. "Because you're some dipshit I should feel justified in hitting."

It felt like we were treading dangerously close to territory I wanted to leave unsaid. Ian didn't seem like the type to feel guilty or want to have some heart to heart. He was almost like Wren in that way. It made *me* feel like Wren that I was standing here and trying to analyze this guy.

But maybe Ian had a softness to him that he didn't let others see. Maybe that was why he was actually here.

Either way, I didn't want him to talk about that night. I wanted to pretend it never happened, that this guy I barely knew never saw me like that.

"Really, you can go," I urged him. "We're probably not going to see each other for the rest of the season so it doesn't even matter." We wouldn't see each other again unless we met in the playoffs or a tournament.

"You seem different," Ian commented, still looking at me blankly.

So do you , I almost said.

The buzzer went off to let us know the game had ended. Ian nodded at me once before turning and leaving the room. I sat down on the bench and waited for the team, bracing myself for whatever the coaches were going to say to me.

***

Wren Ridley

My brother Robin texted me exactly one hundred twelve times until I finally agreed to FaceTime him. When I called and asked him what was so urgent he just said he was bored and missed me, which I clearly didn't buy.

He had just spent the last ten minutes talking absolute nonsense that I didn't care about and now we were on the subject of Thanksgiving.

"You're actually coming home for Thanksgiving?" I asked.

It seemed like a waste of time and energy to me. He went to school all the way in LA, so he would have to get on a five or six hour flight during the busiest time of the year just to be home for a few days. Then it would only be a couple more weeks before he would be flying home for winter break.

"I wasn't going to, but Mom made me feel guilty about it," Robin said. "She has this grand idea that we're all going to be together and watch Fox play hockey, which I guess that will be kind of nice. I try to keep up with his games but they're on so late here."

He was doing more than I was. I was in the same time zone as Fox and I didn't even think about tuning into one of his games. We were only an hour or so away from each other and I hadn't even thought about going to one.

"Speaking of Fox," Robin continued. "He's calling me now. I'm going to add him."

Before I could say anything, Robin was adding Fox to the call and his face popped up a moment later. He wore a scowl like usual, his eyes narrowed as he looked into the screen.

"What's up?" Robin asked him.

"What do you mean 'what's up?' You texted me like eighty times to call you!" Fox exclaimed. "I thought you were dying or something."

"I was," Robin replied. "Of boredom! And I missed you guys. You weren't busy, were you?"

"I was on the phone with Ian," Fox told him.

"And how is that ray of sunshine?"

I was about to hang up. Sitting here and listening to the two of them talk wasn't my idea of something fun, not when I could be doing literally anything else.

"Fine I guess," Fox said. "We were talking about his hockey game. He got in a fight with that Landon kid."

And now I was all ears.

"Hockey is so barbaric," I said in a bored tone, though I was quite intrigued by the conversation.

Fox scoffed. "It's just part of the game."

"It's part of the game to take out your personal frustrations on an opposing player?" I knew that would only get him angry, but I wasn't going to pretend like I understood the violence that took place in that sport.

"It makes it entertaining," Robin interjected. He always put himself in the middle of Fox and me, trying to diffuse situations where the two of us were on our way to fighting.

"So he just fought him for entertainment?" I asked.

"I don't fucking know, Wren," Fox replied, clearly frustrated. "Why do you care?"

"I don't," I said too quickly.

It was a good thing Fox wasn't someone who picked up on that sort of thing. But Robin was, and I could see his expression change on the screen. Luckily he knew not to say anything in front of our brother. If he did say something, I didn't know if I could explain it away. I could barely even rationalize my feelings about Landon to myself.

I wasn't used to caring about someone other than myself or my family. It was something I tended to avoid, keeping all my relationships casual. But I cared for Landon and couldn't understand it. I didn't like not understanding

my own feelings. I didn't like that showing him I cared for him made me feel vulnerable. The more I thought about it, the more it made me feel sick.

So why did I care that Landon got into a fight with Ian? I shouldn't. This was a guy that had tried to pick fights with me since I had known him, a guy who had even punched me once. I had seen him fight before. I knew he could fight. But it was just a huge reminder that there was still a lot of hostility between Landon and Fox, so much so that Fox's own best friend felt the need to fight for him.

"At least it was someone who deserved it, right?" Robin said lightheartedly, trying to ease the tension.

It did nothing to ease the tension coming from me. I was sick of Landon, and other people apparently, feeling like bad things happening to him were deserved.

They didn't know him like I did. They never would. To them, he was the same kid from last year that acted like a villain.

"But now I have to live up to that," Fox replied.

"What?" I asked, raising my eyebrows. I hoped he didn't mean what I thought he did. Not only was it childish and stupid to pick a fight with Landon when he played against him, it was underserved.

"If Ian fought him for what happened last year, now I have to fight him," Fox continued.

"And why is that?"

"I was the captain of that team, Wren," he said.

"I'm failing to see how that's important," I told him. "It's not like you're still in high school. Nobody else but you cares about any of that."

"And he treated my boyfriend like shit, just a reminder," Fox shot back.

"Didn't he apologize for that?" I asked. "I do remember Elijah saying he wanted to coexist with Landon. That'll be pretty hard if you're just going to target him every time you see him."

"Oh, you mean like he did to us?" Fox snapped. "Again, why do you care?"

"I don't," I said. "I just think it's stupid and you're going to get yourself hurt. And in trouble with your boyfriend."

"Are you really trying to get into a hockey fight in front of Mom and Dad?" Robin asked him. I had nearly forgotten that Fox would be playing against Landon during Thanksgiving break, meaning I would have to be present for this as well.

"Dad will think it's funny," Fox said with a shrug.

Robin eventually turned the conversation to something else while I sat there and cursed at myself for the conversation I just had with Fox. It was a good thing he wasn't all that bright, for my sake anyway, otherwise I would be having a lot more explaining to do.

**

Thanks for reading!

Please let me know your thoughts on the chapter:)

26

Landon Reilly

Going to therapy sessions once a week wasn't something that really fit into my schedule, so it always made me miss at least the first half an hour of practice on Wednesdays. It was only a few minutes off campus, but the campus bus didn't go there, so it dropped me off at the shopping center near by and I had to walk the rest of the way. Which was fine when it wasn't freezing or raining, but it was both today. So by the time I got to Dr. Marshall's office, I was soaked, cold, and pissed off.

"Here, I'll turn the heater on," Dr. Marshall offered, moving to grab a small space heater near his desk. He placed it in front of me and turned it on then handed me a blanket which I wrapped around my shoulders.

Dr. Marshall got settled, pulling his chair over to sit across from me. I looked over at the clock. I had only been here for five minutes. Therapy was always the longest hour of my week. The longer Dr. Marshall took to get started, the better.

"Why don't we start by you telling me about your week," he began, crossing one leg over the other.

"It was alright," I said with a shrug.

I hated when we started like this. It was better when he asked me direct questions so I knew what to say, even if I didn't really know the answers he was looking for. He told me he wasn't looking for any specific answers, just my honesty. But somehow, I always felt like I was giving the wrong answers.

"How is school going?" he asked. "Do you feel like you're having trouble with anything?"

"No."

"What about hockey? How was hockey this weekend?"

"We won our game," I said in a bored tone. "I played on the first line. I got into a fight."

"Well, those are some positives," Dr. Marshall replied. "Besides the fighting of course."

He said it like he was making a joke, but he wasn't. It was a lighthearted start to the beginning of his analysis of me.

"Why did you fight?" he asked.

I shrugged again. "Hockey is a physical sport. It just happens."

I left out that it was against someone I knew, that it was a physical response to me being unable to control my emotions. He probably already knew that part anyway.

"But you fight out of anger, right?" Dr. Marshall asked. It was rhetorical. He knew that was the reason. "Something on the ice makes you angry, so you react physically. How does it make you feel when you fight?"

"I don't feel anything," I responded. "Just the anger."

"So, fighting is a product of your anger, to release it in a physical way. But it doesn't actually make that anger go away. It stays, it lingers."

I had no idea what to say to that. I never had any idea what to say.

"Remember how we talked about anger being a secondary emotion?" Dr. Marshall asked.

Of course, I remembered. It instantly made me angry when he said it because it reminded me of Wren and the way he liked to analyze me. He had said the same thing and I hated that he was right.

I nodded.

"What are some emotions that lead you to being angry?"

"Embarrassment. Shame. Sadness." Guilt. Fear.

Dr. Marshall nodded. "It's good that you can pinpoint those emotions. You know what's causing the anger, where those emotions come from."

I didn't say anything, so Dr. Marshall continued.

"Do you want to talk about where those emotions come from?" he asked.

Dr.Marshall knew my upbringing to an extent. He knew about my father, his abuse, and how he tried to send me away to some conversion camp. He knew about how I acted back in school, how I was mean and angry and resentful. But I never went into too much detail. Part of me knew that therapy would only help if I gave the effort, but the other part still wanted to keep everything locked away, not wanting to relive any of the moments with my father.

"Mostly from my father," I said, wrapping the blanket tighter around me like it would somehow shield me from judgement.

"He made you feel ashamed of who you are," he said. "And that shame is still there. That shame leads you to feeling embarrassed and sad and angry."

I hated being analyzed like this, even if it was coming from Dr. Marshall, who was doing it to help me, and not Wren, who did it to annoy me.

"I guess," I agreed.

"Do you remember when your father first made you feel ashamed?"

It was hard to think back that far. It brought on too many unpleasant memories.

My father probably knew I was gay before I even knew. It seemed like that anyway. He never wanted me being too close to any of my friends, didn't let anyone stay over or be in my room. I never understood why until one day I asked him about it.

*

"But why Dad?" I whined following him into the kitchen. It was Friday afternoon. Dad had just gotten home from work when I asked him if a couple of my friends could stay over. He immediately said no. I knew he would.

"Because I said so, Landon," Dad replied, grabbing a glass from the cabinet and filling it with water.

"It's just Micah and Elijah, Dad, please," I begged. I had stayed over both of their houses before, but Dad had stopped letting me. I thought it would be different if they stayed here.

"You think I don't see the way you look at Elijah?" he snapped, setting his glass down on the counter.

It felt like I had been hit with a brick. My eyes widened and I nearly stopped breathing. He couldn't mean what I thought he meant.

"Or the way you act around him at church and at hockey?" he continued. "You want all of his attention. I'm telling you right now that it needs to stop. I clearly can't trust you to spend too much time with those boys. You're too old to be having sleepovers anyway."

I was only eleven.

"I don't understand," I said, my voice quiet and shaking.

He gave me a knowing look. "Yes, you do."

*

He didn't bring it up again for a while, probably thinking if he just let it be that it would go away soon enough. But a few months later, he realized that it wouldn't when he saw me hugging Elijah one day after hockey practice. He was furious with me. That was the first time he explicitly brought up my sexuality.

*

Dad was fuming when I got in the car after practice. He wouldn't even look at me. He just silently stared through the windshield while I threw my things in the backseat before climbing into the passenger's seat beside him.

"I hope you're not too tired," Dad said, his voice low.

"I'm exhausted."

"Well, you still have training to do at home," he said. "I'm going to work you so hard you won't be able to stand when you're done. You know why?"

I stared at him with wide eyes. "Why?"

"Because you defied me!" he exclaimed, smacking a hand down on the steering wheel and causing me to jump. "I told you I didn't want you getting close to those boys, especially Elijah, and there you were hugging him right in front of me like some fairy! You are having gay thoughts Landon, I know you are. I thought if I just kept you away from them as much as I could, those thoughts would leave your head but they clearly haven't, so now you are going to work and work and work until they're gone. Do you understand me?"

All I could do was nod with a horrified look on my face.

*

That night he made me run until I threw up and could no longer stand. I was sore for days.

My father never let me forget how ashamed he was of me, how disgusting and disappointing I was.

I told this all to Dr. Marshall, who nodded with an even expression.

"It takes a lot to unlearn things that have been ingrained in us since childhood," Dr. Marshall said. "I want you to think of some goals that can help you think more positively of yourself. These can be anything from

doing positive affirmations or just doing something out of your comfort zone that you wouldn't have let yourself do before. Then we'll discuss them next week."

"Okay."

"I know we've talked about your support system being Micah and his family and your sister," Dr. Marshall started. "But is there anyone closer to you here that you feel supported by? A teammate? Coach? Friends at school? A significant other?"

I contemplated that question for a moment. Coach Foreman and Rojas were supportive enough, but they weren't people I could see myself going to outside of hockey. Jess could've been my friend if I didn't snap at her when she was being nice to me.

And then there was Wren, the person I spent the most alone time with. It seemed like he knew everything about me just by looking at him, but I was still too much of a coward to let myself open up to him. I was too unsure of how he felt about me, confused by his mixed signals.

There were times where it did feel like he supported me, like when we went to that gay bar and when he brought me on drives to call me down. But then there were the times that he made it seem like he didn't give a shit about me. He was too much of an asshole to be consistent with me, and I was too angry to let myself be vulnerable.

"I guess there's some people," I muttered.

"Like who?"

"One of my teammates," I said. "And... I guess this guy I hang out with sometimes."

I didn't know what to call Wren. He wasn't my friend or my boyfriend, but he was more than an acquaintance. He wasn't a hookup either. It was something else entirely.

"Someone you're seeing?" Dr. Marshall asked.

My eyes widened. "No. No. Just someone I know from back home."

"But he's not your friend?"

"No. It's complicated."

Dr. Marshall smiled at that. "Okay, I know what that means."

My face heated in embarrassment.

"It's not–"

"Whatever he is to you, I hope that he's someone you can lean on," Dr. Marshall interjected. "I can't stress enough the importance of having people around you that can be your support system. It's vital in your healing process."

I didn't think Wren was someone I could lean on, but he was pretty much all I had.

The session ended soon after that and I left the office to walk back to the shopping center to wait for the campus bus. It was still raining, but it had lightened up a bit.

When I finally got to practice, my team was out on the ice doing drills. I stepped onto the ice wordlessly and nodded at Coach Foreman before starting to do my warmups. When I finished with warming up, I integrated into the group for some drills.

Practice ended, and I was glad. It was hard going there after therapy when all I wanted to do was go back to my dorm and curl up in bed.

I decided to just get changed and shower back at the dorm so I could leave here as soon as possible. As I was gathering my things, I felt that someone was looking at me. I turned to see Cooper and his friends were all looking in my direction, seemingly talking about me.

I was going to ignore them, but I was tired and frustrated and worn out from therapy, so I turned to them with a glare.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I snapped. "Do you want to come say it to my face?"

Cooper looked at his friends before bringing his attention back to me.

"We were just saying how it's unfair that you get to show up late to practice all the time and still got the chance to be first line," Cooper answered nonchalantly.

"That's none of your business."

He shrugged. "It just seems like someone's playing favorites. Probably Rojas. Are you hooking up with him or something? Fucking your way to favoritism? We all know you like dick–"

I was seeing red. I started moving toward him, my fists clenched and ready to pummel his face before someone placed their hand on my shoulder and stopped me.

"Not worth it bro," they said. It was Shea, the one who's place I took on the first line when he was injured.

I let out a huff and stormed away, grabbing my things and leaving the locker room without looking back.

I was fuming as I walked back to my dorm. I opened the door to my room and threw my things inside before grabbing a towel and going back out to the bathroom.

Being in the shower did nothing to calm me. I stood there, my hand braced against the wall as the water sprayed down my body. I wanted to punch something.

Cooper had a lot of nerve saying that in front of his friends, or saying it at all. I wanted to strangle him.

I didn't know how long I was in the shower, but the water had started to cool down, so I quickly washed myself before getting out. When I left the bathroom, just a towel wrapped around my waist, I was greeted by Wren leaning against my bedroom door.

"You take long showers," he commented.

"What are you doing here?" I let out a sigh.

"It's really not good for the environment to do that," Wren said, ignoring my question.

"What are you doing here?" I repeated. I hated that he was looking at me while I was just in a towel. I wanted to get inside and cover up, and hide from his gaze.

"Well, you haven't been around since you had your away game this weekend."

"I was busy."

Wren stepped forward and took my chin in his hand, moving my head to look over my face.

"There's no bruise," he said.

"Why would there be a bruise?" He was so close to me. I was torn between leaning forward to kiss him and shoving him away.

"From your fight with Ian."

"How the hell do you even know about that?" I snapped.

Wren grinned at me, my chin still in his hand. "My brother is best friends with him, in case you've forgotten."

"And Fox told you that?"

"He just mentioned it."

We stared at each other for a moment. Wren's eyes moved from mine to my lips. I wasn't about to let him kiss me like this, so I backed up and took my chin out of his grasp before moving toward my bedroom door.

"You seem angry," Wren commented as he followed me into my room.

"I am fucking angry," I snapped, grabbing clothes out of my closet. I opened the closet door all the way so I could stand behind it as I changed, shielding myself from Wren.

"And why is that?"

I shut the closet door once I was changed and ran the towel over my hair to dry it. Wren was looking at me expectantly, sitting on top of my desk.

"It's none of your business, Wren," I muttered, throwing my towel into the hamper.

"Where's Kyle?"

"He has a lab until like nine."

"Hm," he hummed.

I was taking deep breaths, trying to get a cap on my anger. If Wren noticed it, which I was sure he did, he didn't say anything.

"So, why did you fight Ian?" he asked.

"Wren, drop it," I snapped, glaring over at him.

He motioned for me to go to him, so I did. I stood between his legs as he sat on my desk. I looked away from him, but he brought my gaze back when he placed both of his hands on the sides of my face.

He didn't say anything, which surprised me. Wren always had something to say, and he didn't care if it offended me or angered me. If he wanted to say something, he would say it. It was always so hard for me to read his expressions, but his gaze was softened and his eyes were so focused. He

almost looked like a different person. I wasn't even sure that I knew who was in front of me right then.

"Stop acting like you don't want to kiss me," he said. There it was. That was more like the Wren I knew.

I didn't say anything back. Instead, I placed my hands on the tops of his thighs and planted my mouth on his.

The kiss was rough at the start of it. As soon as my mouth touched his, I put all I had into the kiss, all the anger, the frustration, and the embarrassment. My hands squeezed his thighs as I kissed him deeper, rougher. My teeth came down on his bottom lip without me realizing, and Wren let out a wince.

"Sorry," I said, pulling away.

He just pulled me closer. "That was hot."

And his lips were back on mine.

I laid him down on the desk, his legs wrapping around me and pulling my hips into his. Our lips moved together perfectly, quickly, and with urgency.

All that anger and embarrassment was forgotten in this kiss. They were changed into something else, something different and foreign to me.

This kiss was fresh and addicting.

It was all consuming.

**

Happy New Year!

Please let me know your thoughts!

27

Wren Ridley

"The lattes here are *amazing* ," Stella said for the third time she sat down. She and Jess showed up at the coffee shop after my run and sat down across from me, Stella sitting in Landon's usual spot.

I didn't hide my annoyance at the two of them, but they both chose to ignore it. Stella never let stuff like that get to her. That was probably why she kept being friends with me; she could withstand my efforts to push people away.

I stared across at her, my eyebrows raised as she turned to say something to Jess. The two of them giggled at whatever she said and I crossed my arms over my chest.

"What, are we ruining your alone time?" Stella asked, looking back at me. "Is that why you're being pouty?"

"Something like that," I responded, sipping on my latte.

Just then, Landon walked in the door, his cheeks flushed from his run and the cold air outside. He glanced over quickly to where I sat as if just making sure I was there before walking up to the counter and placing his order with Anthony.

The two of them made small talk, Anthony grinning at him. That caused an uncomfortable feeling in my stomach. Landon rarely ever talked to anyone other than me, but there he was, making small talk with Anthony, the two of them grinning at each other. I didn't like it.

When Landon had his coffee, he walked over to our usual table and stopped for a moment as if unsure what to do. Stella was in his seat and the only seat available was the one next to me.

The two of us locked eyes and he sat down beside me.

"Hi Landon!" Stella exclaimed excitedly.

"Hey," he replied quietly. He nodded in greeting to Jess. His posture was rigid and tense and he turned slightly to face me, his knee knocking into mine.

"You actually just reminded me of something," Stella started. "The rink at our school is going to start doing public skating on the weekends and we *need* to go."

"I won't be there, but you guys have a good time," I told her.

She made a face at me.

"Of course, you'll be there, Wren," Stella replied. "And so will Landon and James."

"I don't–" Landon started. "I have hockey."

"So we'll go when you're free," Stella said with a shrug. "I *really* want to go guy. With all of us."

"It'll be fun," Jess said, directing a smile at Landon.

He looked at her and I could see it on his face that he was going to give in. He felt guilty about whatever it was that went down between them, but he was too scared to try and make amends. This way, he could do it without really saying anything and hope that the guilt went away on its own.

"Yeah, I mean, I guess it could be fun," he said, glancing over at me.

"I'm still not going," I said.

"Yes, you are!" Stella said.

Stella stood up, Jess following her, and told us they had to get going. The two of them walked out of the coffee shop hand in hand, saying goodbye to Anthony as they left.

"You don't have to do that," I told Landon once we were alone.

"Do what?" he asked.

"Give in to Jess just because you feel guilty about whatever happened between the two of you."

Landon glared at me. "I'm not giving in to her, I'm just trying–"

"Trying to make amends so you stop feeling guilty," I finished for him.

"Shut up."

He sipped on his coffee, looking away from me. He didn't bother moving to the other side of the table to his usual spot, keeping his leg pressed against mine.

"You're going to go though, right?" Landon asked after a moment, his eyes meeting mine.

"I thought the point was going with Jess? You don't need me there."

Landon narrowed his eyes at me.

"Just say that you want me to go," I said with a grin.

"No."

"Just say it."

"You know that I do, so why do you need me to say it?" he snapped.

Partially because I wanted to give him a hard time, and partially because I needed the validation.

"I don't know anything unless you say it," I replied.

"That's such bullshit. You think you know everything."

Now that wasn't true. But Landon viewed me differently than I viewed myself.

Landon let out a heavy sigh, glaring at me.

"Fine," he said. "I want you there."

"Now, was that so hard?" I teased, taking a sip of my latte.

Landon acted irritated with me, but he really wasn't. I could tell that there was no real anger on his face, just the usual annoyance and slight embarrassment he always had around me.

I watched him as he sipped on his coffee. He looked straight ahead, like he couldn't feel my eyes on him. He seemed calmer than normal.

When we finished our drinks, the two of us silently got up from our seats and threw our cups away before leaving the coffee shop, Landon waving goodbye at Anthony as we left.

"What was that?" I asked as we crossed the street together.

"Hm?" Landon hummed, glancing over at me.

"You and Anthony."

His eyebrows moved up on his forehead, his expression one of confusion and disbelief.

"Nothing. I was just being friendly."

"Which you aren't," I reminded him.

He scoffed and didn't respond.

"You're not friendly," I said. "But you are with him."

"So what?" he snapped.

I shrugged. "I suppose it doesn't matter."

Maybe I just wanted him to confirm that he wasn't flirting with Anthony and trying to keep his options open. Maybe I wanted him to tell me that I was his only option. But, of course, I couldn't say that to him, couldn't show him that he had snuck his way into my life and changed me in ways I couldn't even explain to myself.

The two of us parted ways, and I didn't see Landon until a couple days later at the ice rink with Stella, Jess, and James.

I never liked going to the ice rink, even just to watch my brother play hockey. It was too cold, there were always too many people. If I wanted to be cold, I would just step outside. I never understood why people would willingly go somewhere indoors to be cold and enjoyed it.

Being here on a public skate day was no different. It was no hockey game, but there were a ton of people out on the ice. The only place I could get away from them all was the stands, and that was exactly where I went as soon as we arrived, much to the dismay of Stella.

Stella had rented skates for me after I sat down in the stands, making no effort to go out onto the ice with the others. She dropped the skates in front of me and gave me a stern look.

"Get those on and let's go!" she said. She sat down on my right, Landon on my other side, and put her skates on before following Jess and James out onto the ice.

Landon was lacing up his skates when he looked over at me.

"Just do it," he said.

"I said I would come. I never said I would skate."

"So you're just going to sit here?"

"Precisely."

He shook his head at me, standing up from the bench we were sitting on. Instead of going out onto the ice like I thought he would, he knelt down in front of me and took the skates that Stella had left on the ground before propping my foot up on his knee.

"What exactly are you doing?" I asked him as he slipped my shoe off and put the skate on my foot.

"I'm putting your skates on," he muttered, pulling the laces as tight.

I hated to admit even to myself that I couldn't keep my eyes off of him as he did it. I watched his hands as he worked with the laces, noticing his veins and knuckles as he pulled the laces again and started to tie them.

"Are they too tight?" he asked as he finished with the first skate.

"That depends on how tight they are supposed to be."

"Tight enough that your foot and ankle are supported, but not so tight that it hurts."

Landon placed my foot back on the ground and took my other one up on his knee and did the same thing. It was strange I was even letting him do this, but I couldn't find it in me to stop him.

When he was done tying the other skate, he looked up at me, still kneeling.

"That was very nice of you," I said. "I'm still not skating."

Landon rolled his eyes and got up before sitting down on the bench beside me again.

"You don't know how to skate, do you?" Landon asked.

He was *giggling* before I could even answer him. Full on giggling. I had never heard that sound come from him since I had known him, and it felt like this was new for him too. He tried hiding his face behind his hand, but I could still see the way his face was lit up, his smile so wide it was hard for him to keep his eyes open.

I couldn't even get annoyed at him for a moment. I could just watch. It was strange seeing him like this, smiling and joyful. The sound of his laugh was unexpected coming from him. It was a fit of giggles, high pitched and rolling out of his mouth like he couldn't stop them. It was nice to hear, even if it was at my expense.

"It's not that funny," I said with a straight face.

That only caused him to laugh even more. A fuller, deeper laugh now. He tried to speak but he couldn't get the words out between his laughter.

I couldn't look away from him. The happiness on his face kept my eyes glued there. I never imagined that seeing him like this would make me never want to look away, would make me want to see this look on him all the time.

Shit. I was in some deep shit.

I knew, no matter how much I tried to push those feelings out, that I liked him. I actually liked Landon, and it made me feel sick to my stomach at the same time it made me feel light as air.

He was rude, and mean, and basically hated me, but I liked him anyway.

And it was stupid of me, so stupid, because I had never let myself feel this way for anyone. I had closed myself off emotionally for a reason, and now someone had gotten through my guards without even trying, probably without even wanting to.

"I'm sorry," Landon said between laughs, out of breath. He placed a hand on his chest, breathing in and out deeply to catch his breath.

I raised my eyebrows at him. "And why was that so funny?"

He chuckled, glancing over at me. "It's just funny that you don't know how to do something."

"I don't know how to do a lot of things."

Landon finally sobered up, but there was still a hint of a smile on his face, his eyes still lit up like a little kid on Christmas morning.

"God, that was funny," he said. "I haven't laughed like that in a while. My face hurts."

"Glad I could provide entertainment for you."

Landon rolled his eyes at me and stood up from the bench before pulling me up by the wrist after him. I could barely walk in these skates, but he walked like normal, in big strides as he pulled me along. He let go of my wrist before he stepped onto the ice then turned to look at me, motioning for me to follow him.

"Come on," he said. "Just step on. I'm not going to let you fall."

"I'm not afraid of falling."

I just didn't want to be bothered with skating. When I was younger, Dad had put both Fox and me in hockey and I didn't take to it like he did. I was never a team player, and we found that out quickly when I refused to skate with the rest of the kids while Fox was skating circles around everyone.

Landon held out his hand and I looked down at it with a strange expression.

"You want to hold my hand in front of this many people?" I asked him, looking around at the amount of people on the ice.

There were teenagers skating around the rink racing each other, nearly knocking into the people who were going at a leisurely pace, families with children who were pushing around milk crates to keep themselves from falling, and even kids no older than five who were skating around like it was second nature.

Landon retracted his hand for a moment before letting out a breath and grabbing my hand anyway. He pulled me out onto the ice, and I felt myself slipping until he straightened me out. I grabbed onto the wall while my other hand stayed in his.

"Let go of the wall," Landon demanded.

"No, I don't think I will."

"I thought you said you're not afraid of falling?"

"I'm not afraid of it. That doesn't mean I *want* to fall. I don't."

Landon skated around so that he was in front of me, skating backwards. He plucked my hand off the wall and pulled me away from it so that I couldn't grab on again. He let one of my hands drop to my side while still holding the other to pull me along.

He looked content and at ease as he pulled me through the rink. Maybe it was the fact that he could be out here on the ice with no pressure. Skating was clearly something he enjoyed, but could he really enjoy it at hockey when there was so much expected of him?

I had never seen him so content. It was both bizarre and captivating.

We eventually passed by Stella and Jess, who were holding hands as they skated along. James was skating around the rink by himself. I had watched him fall a few times and both Landon and me laughed each time.

I didn't make any effort to actually skate, and Landon didn't make me. It was like he was just happy with pulling me along, not caring who here saw him holding my hand. That carefree feeling looked like it took a weight off his chest. He looked younger, less burdened by everything that ran through his mind.

Eventually, Landon dropped me off at the exit and let me off the ice while he did a few laps on his own. He moved on his skates like it was more natural than walking. His hair flowed back in the wind of his movement, and when he passed by, he sent me a smirk.

We left the others after a while, Landon bringing me back to his room to drop off his skates. Kyle wasn't there like usual.

"Will you ever go skating again?" Landon asked me, leaning back against his bed.

"Not likely," I said.

"It was actually kind of fun," he replied. "I didn't think it would be."

"So why did you even go in the first place?"

He shrugged, thinking for a moment before responding.

"I guess I finally decided I needed to stop being a lonely fuck and actually make an effort to have friends."

"I wasn't enough?" I teased.

"Well, you're a little more than a friend." He looked down at the floor, his cheeks flushing.

For once, I was speechless. This was too much for even me. It was too much to try and figure out exactly what his emotions were, and for me to fully come to terms with mine.

So, I stepped forward and tilted his chin up so that he would reach my gaze, and planted my lips on his in a soft kiss. Landon placed his hand on the back of my head, pushing his fingers through my hair like he could bring me any closer to him. This kiss was soft, almost shy, our lips light as feathers against each other.

We didn't say anything as it ended. We just kicked off our shoes and climbed into Landon's bed, me lying on my back with him between my legs, his head on my chest underneath my chin and my arms around him.

This had all felt like it moved too fast into something I couldn't name, something neither of us would say out loud. All I knew was I was too far gone with him. And this was the start of something more.

**

Thanks for reading!

Please tell me your thoughts!

28

Landon Reilly

I didn't realize what I was hearing when the door opened at first, so my eyes stayed shut and my head lay comfortably on Wren's chest like it was a cushion just for me. It wasn't until the door shut and Kyle spoke that my brain had caught up to the fact that it was the next morning and my roommate had walked in on me cuddling with Wren.

"Oh wow," Kyle said, still standing in front of the door.

My eyes shot open and I picked my head up to look at him. He stood there with an amused expression, biting on the straw of his coffee cup with a grin. I wasn't as panicked as I thought I'd be. Kyle wasn't cruel, and Wren could always find a way to make any situation casual and calm.

I looked down at Wren, whose eyes were now open, then back at Kyle, unsure of what to say or do.

"Don't mind me," Kyle said, walking over to his side of the room. "Act like I'm not even here."

"You don't want us to do that, trust me," Wren replied, sitting up behind me. My face heated at his words, and I turned around to shoot him a lethal glare.

"What is wrong with you?" I asked.

Wren shrugged, grinning at me before placing a chaste kiss on my lips and getting up from the bed.

"Afraid I have to go or else my schedule is really going to be derailed," he said, making his way to the door. "Kyle, always a pleasure." And with that, he opened the door and left the room.

Kyle and I were silent for a moment, me watching the door and him watching me.

"I had a feeling there was something going on with you two," Kyle said after a few moments. I looked over at him with a blank expression. "There is something going on, right?"

"Something like that," I said with a sigh, getting up from the bed to go to the bathroom.

There was something going on with Wren and me, that was undeniable. He didn't say anything different when I told him I considered him to be more than a friend. There was no more denying it or trying to push each other away, on my end at least. It was exhausting trying to hold onto that hatred and that anger for him. If there was anything that going to therapy for the last few weeks had taught me it was that I needed to have a support system and I needed to let myself be happy, so that was what I was trying to do.

Would being with Wren really make me happy? That I was yet to find out. But being with him allowed me to be myself, my more authentic self. And I liked him more than I thought I ever would despite how he could be sometimes.

When I was finished in the bathroom, my phone started ringing, Micah's name popping up on the screen.

"Hello?" I answered, leaning up against the wall outside my room.

"Hey," Micah replied.

"What's up?" He was probably just going to chew me out for not calling him enough like he was my mother or something.

"I was thinking we could hang out this weekend," Micah said.

"I have hockey," I replied in confusion.

"I know," Micah laughed. "We're playing each other. I'm going to be in Providence on Saturday."

"Oh shit."

I hadn't even realized. My team would undoubtedly start watching game tape of the opposing team this week, but I never really thought much about who we were playing until then. I had a game during the week before we would play Boston College on Saturday.

"Yeah, so I was thinking I could stay Saturday night after the game and just catch the train back on Sunday," Micah said. "I assume you have Sunday off too right?"

"Yeah, I do." But that didn't mean I wanted Micah staying the night.

"So it's cool then?"

"Sure."

"Awesome," he excitedly replied. "I can't wait to see you."

"Yeah, me too."

And I truly was excited to see him, but him being here would mean I would have to spend a weekend away from Wren and our newly established... whatever we were to each other.

"And I can't wait to meet your friends," Micah added.

"I'll have to see what they're doing this weekend." I had no intention of introducing Micah to Wren and the others.

"Cool. I'll see you Saturday!"

"Yeah, see you."

We said our goodbyes and hung up the phone. I let out a heavy sigh before pushing my door open and going into my room.

"Is it cool if I have someone stay over this weekend?" I asked Kyle. He raised his eyebrows.

"You mean not Wren?"

I looked away from him. "No, my friend from home. We're playing each other this weekend and he wants to stay after."

Kyle nodded. "Yeah, that's cool. I probably won't be around anyway." I didn't even want to ask where Kyle was off to all the time.

After that, I got ready for class, skipping my morning run. I could just head to practice early and get a run in on the treadmill. I was thinking maybe Wren and me would run together this morning, but he was out of the room faster than I could even think about asking him. Maybe he was more embarrassed about Kyle seeing us than he let on.

Jess was already in class by the time I got there, so I did what I hadn't done for a while: I sat beside her.

"Hey," she greeted with a wide smile.

"Hey," I said. "What's up?"

"Oh nothing," she said. "I'm really glad you came with us to the rink yesterday."

I nodded. I was glad I went too, glad Wren was there. It was sort of nice not having to be alone, actually enjoying time out with friends. I didn't picture myself ever making friends in college, yet here I was.

"It was fun," I told her.

A moment later, Cooper walked into the room and the two of us shared a glare. He nodded at Jess in greeting while ignoring me, and sat somewhere behind us.

"What was that about?" Jess whispered, leaning in so I could hear.

"He and I don't get along."

"I thought you guys were friends?"

"No."

"Hm," Jess hummed. "I never really liked him that much anyway."

I smiled over at her, though it felt odd to do it. She smiled back.

I was glad Jess didn't hold anything against me. She was a nice person, and a perceptive one. She probably knew there was always something going on with me, which lead me to snap at her and push her away. But she never held it against me, and when I was ready to move past that, so was she.

I was glad I had her, especially in this class where I had Cooper shooting daggers at the back of my head.

When I finished my classes for the day, I headed over to the rink early to get a run in. I wasn't the only guy there, but there were only three of us in the workout room and we all kept to ourselves.

After practice ended and I took a shower, I got a text from Wren as I was walking back to my dorm.

From: Wren

Do you want to go for a drive?

To: Wren

sure pick me up in 10?

From: Wren

I will be there in ten minutes.

I laughed slightly at the formality of his text message and walked the rest of the way to my dorm. I changed my clothes and sprayed on some cologne before getting a text that Wren was outside.

Wren, of course, had an audio book playing when I slipped into the passenger's seat, and he said nothing as I put my seatbelt on just before he

drove away from the dorm building.

He went the usual way he always did when we took these drives, stopping at a drive through for fries and placing them in the cupholders. Wren rested his arm on the center console as he drove, making me want to reach over and intertwine our hands. But I didn't. I kept my hands to myself, still so unsure of what he wanted from me, of what he would accept from me.

Wren eased my confusion when he reached over on his own and grabbed my hand into his. I was relieved that he did. At least that was confirmation that he had similar feelings to me.

We held hands in silence all the way to the beach. Once we were there, Wren paused his book and shut the car off before picking up his fries and turning toward me, releasing my hand.

"What?" I asked him, self conscious about the way he was looking at me.

"Just looking at you," he said casually.

"Why?"

"Because I find you attractive."

I looked away in embarrassment.

"Shut up," I snapped.

I looked out the windshield at the waves beating against the shore. I understood why Wren liked to come here. It was calming and serene. The glow from the moon against the water looking like a painting.

I could still feel Wren's stare on me.

"What?" I snapped, turning to face him.

He had his signature grin on his face.

"I don't know why you still act so shy around me," he said. "It is quite endearing though."

I didn't want to act shy around him. I wanted to be as confident as he was, to know exactly what he thought of me, what he thought of us. But he just made things so fucking difficult. It was like he didn't want me to know him the way he knew me.

"It's because you're confusing," I told him seriously, picking up my fries out of the cupholder and throwing one into my mouth.

"And what about me is so confusing?" he asked, seeming to be genuinely curious.

"I never know what you're thinking," I said. "Or how you feel."

I hated even saying that out loud. I didn't like Wren knowing my insecurities. He could figure them out just fine, he didn't need me to actually say them out loud.

"Why don't you just ask?"

I gave him an irritated look. Like it was that simple to just ask. He never said anything that he didn't want to say or that he didn't mean. If he wanted me to know something, he would say it.

"Landon," Wren said. It still felt so strange to hear my name from his lips. "Just ask me what you want to know."

"What is this to you?" I blurted, hating myself as soon as I said it. I didn't want to be vulnerable with him. I didn't want him to see me as a fool.

"What do you mean?"

"You're so annoying," I muttered in response. "You know what I mean!"

"Are you talking about how I feel about you and me?" Wren asked, a grin forming again on his face. "Are my affections not clear to you?"

"Stop talking like that," I said. "Just talk like a normal person for once."

"Fine, then let me be clear," Wren said, the grin leaving his face. "I am interested in you. I want you and I to be together."

I let out another sigh. "Okay."

"And now what about you?"

I shot him a look of confusion. "What about me?"

"How do you feel about us? Do you want us to be together?"

"I mean... obviously."

I still felt like a fool even though that was what I was trying to avoid. What was I doing, making him reveal his feelings to me? I was just too insecure to let this go on and see how it went.

"It wasn't obvious to me," Wren replied, popping a fry into his mouth.

"How could it not be?" I asked. "I basically said it yesterday at the rink."

"Sometimes I don't know if you really like me all that much," he admitted. And it felt like this was the first time I was seeing any semblance of insecurity from him. It felt strange, but it also made me feel guilty.

"I just have... issues and shit," I told him. "You know that."

He just nodded.

"Well, that we have that settled," Wren started, placing his fries back in the cup holder.

He leaned over the center console and took my lips onto his. It was surprising that every kiss with Wren felt like something new and exciting.

The kiss was empty for a moment, me almost forgetting to start kissing him back. But then I did and it was like we were connected. I placed my hand

on the back of his head, trying to pull him even closer to me. Wren's lips moved slowly and methodically, like he had the whole thing planned out in his head beforehand.

I followed his lead like I usually did, my lips moving along with his like he was directing how he wanted them to go.

Then the kiss sped up. He brought one hand to the side of my neck and and the other was moving down my chest. He brought his hand lower and lower until his fingers brushed the front of my jeans. I gasped into his mouth and I felt his lips form a smile against mine.

Wren took his lips off mine and brought them down on my neck. My breaths were getting heavy as he sucked on my skin and moved his hand over the front of my pants.

"James isn't going to be in my room tonight," Wren said against my skin, goosebumps forming down my body.

"Oh," I breathed out.

"So, you want to go there?" he asked, his mouth still against my neck.

"Yeah." I barely recognized my own voice. I sounded so desperate and I hated it.

Wren backed off and it felt like I could breathe fully again. He started the car and started making his way back to his dorm. This time, I wasn't afraid to grab onto his hand.

By the time we got back to his room, I was full of nerves. I didn't know what to expect or what he was planning to do, but I knew I wanted to please him. It seemed like Wren was always the one doing things for me, initiating whatever moments we had. I didn't want it to be like that.

Wren led me to his room, our hands connected. Once we were both inside, Wren shut the door and pushed me against it, his lips finding their way to my neck once again.

I let my hands roam his body, up his shirt to caress his back, and to the front to rub my hand down his smooth, toned abdomen. My hands went lower, to the top of his pants, before I made it to the button of his jeans. I hesitated for a moment before unbuttoning them slowly, waiting to hear any sounds of protest come from Wren.

I heard none, so I continued. I popped the button before slowly lowering the zipper on his jeans. Wren sucked hard on my neck, causing me to let out a loud moan.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Wren asked against my skin.

I didn't answer. Instead, I lowered myself to my knees in front of him, grasping his pants and boxers.

"Have you ever done this before?" Wren asked me.

I looked up at him with narrowed eyes.

"No, Wren, I've never fucking done this before," I said. He grinned down at me, catching my chin with one of his hands.

"And you're sure you want to?"

"I wouldn't be down here if I didn't."

"Well, go ahead then," he encouraged.

My nerves doubled at that moment. All I could think about was making a fool of myself, doing so poorly that Wren wouldn't want me to touch him ever again. He must have known I was feeling this way, of course he would, because he ran his thumb over my bottom lip.

"You'll be fine," he said. "I've never heard of a bad blowjob in my life."

That was only slightly encouraging.

I pulled his pants and boxers down together and paused. I knew exactly what I was doing when I put myself in this position, but now that it was

here in front of me, I hesitated.

"Stroke it first," Wren instructed.

So I did just that. I spit in my hand before placing it on him, easing the friction. He grew in my hand and started making little noises of pleasure. I was sure he would be happy with me just getting him off like this, but I wanted to go further.

I stopped stroking and put my mouth on him. Wren let out a breathy moan, looking down at me with hooded, glossy eyes. He put his hand in my hair, but he didn't move my head. He let me do all the work, going at my own pace.

"Fuck..." he breathed out.

That encouraged me more, choking a bit as I continued to take more of him into my mouth.

This sensation ended up being different than I thought it would. I had thought it would be awkward, or that I would be disgusted with myself. But it was neither of those things. It turned out that I liked making Wren feel good. I liked seeing him come undone in front of me. He was always so calm and collected. Seeing him so desperate and needy was the hottest thing I had ever seen.

Wren's breath got heavier as I continued and just as he was about to finish, he took himself out of my mouth and finished in his hand. He was breathing heavy as he grabbed a tissue from his desk to wipe his hand.

After he cleaned off, he walked back to me and pulled me to my feet before kissing me again.

"Why'd you do that?" I muttered against his lips.

Wren pulled away but kept me near. "I didn't think you'd want it in your mouth the first time."

I looked away from him for a moment, but he took my face in his hand and made me face him.

"That was so hot," Wren said. He always knew when I was feeling insecure and unsure of myself. And sometimes, when he was feeling nice, he would reassure me.

A smile formed on my face without me realizing. Wren shot me a wicked grin.

"And I plan to give you lots of practice."

**

Thanks for reading!

Let me know your thoughts

29

Landon Reilly

Our game against Boston College on Saturday was not going well. We had yet to put the puck in the net while BC had done it twice, one of the goals being Micah's.

Micah had really refined his skill since the last time I had seen him play. He was faster and grittier, shining in a way I hadn't seen from him before. I couldn't tell if that bettered or worsened my frustrations about the game; that he was shining while I was doing nothing for my team at that moment. I wasn't scoring or making plays. We were being beat in every sense.

Chris Rojas tried his hardest to encourage his team, as he always did, but nothing was working or going our way. It was a mercy when the game finally ended. Our coaches were clearly pissed about the way the game went, but they didn't say much. They would give us hell on Monday, I was sure.

After showering and changing, I left the locker room where I was immediately faced with Micah's grinning face.

"Good game!" he exclaimed, throwing his arms around me in a hug.

"Yeah, for you," I said, putting one arm around him and patting his back.

Micah pulled away and he was still grinning.

"You played great," he said, because he was sickeningly kind and would lie to me as long as it made me feel good about myself.

The two of us made our way out of the rink and out to the parking lot. I was planning on just taking him on the campus bus back to my dorm and grabbing some dinner.

"So what are your plans tonight?" Micah asked.

"Just going back to my dorm," I told him. I knew Micah would be happy with anything we did. He was an easy going, just happy to be there kind of guy.

We continued walking until we stopped at the sound of someone shouting my name. I turned around, confused, to see it was Stella who was yelling with Jess, James, and Wren following behind her.

Wren had his hands in his pockets, his head tilted slightly downward but he was looking up at me. The slight breeze ruffled his hair a bit and his cheeks were rosy from the cold. He looked so soft like that. I wanted the two of us to be able to lock ourselves in my room and hide under my blankets, him holding me against his chest as I fell asleep.

It felt strange even allowing myself to want things like that. I wasn't used to it. It never seemed like it could be a possibility for me. But there I was, imagining running off with Wren and wanting him to be close to me.

However, that didn't mean I wanted him and Micah to meet.

"Are these your friends?" Micah asked with a smile, gesturing toward the group.

"Sort of," I replied.

"Of course we're your friends!" Stella exclaimed. "God, Landon what's it going to take for you to call us your friends?" She said it in a joking way, but I still blushed at her words, which caused Wren to grin at me.

"I'm Micah," Micah introduced kindly. "I'm Landon's friend from home."

Stella introduced herself and the others, pointing to everyone in the group. As she did so, something came to my mind.

"Were you guys at the game?" I asked when she was finished.

"Yup!" Jess answered. "Figured we'd watch while we waited for you so we could all go out after."

I glanced over at Wren. His face was blank, giving away nothing. He hated hockey and skating and everything that had to do with it. But he came and watched me play one of the most embarrassing games of my life.

I put a hand on my forehead.

"You guys didn't have to do that," I said with a sigh, shaking my head slightly. It wasn't like any of them knew much about hockey, but it didn't take a genius to see that we lost. Badly.

"It was fun," Stella said with a shrug. "I kind of like it now. And your school is a lot better than Brown anyway."

"You guys go to Brown?" Micah asked, confusion in his tone.

"They do," Jess said. "I go to PC with Landon."

"We're going to the club, you guys coming or what?" James asked, clearly anxious to get going. "That is, if your friend is cool with queer people."

Micah's eyes widened. "Oh, yes, of course!" he said.

"We're just going to go back to my room," I told them. Jess and Stella booed at me while Wren shot me an intense, serious stare.

"Come with us," Wren said, and if I didn't know any better, I would think he was pleading.

He held my stare for a moment before looking over at Micah. In my head, he was jealous. In reality, I didn't know if that was the case.

"We should go, Landon," Micah said, nudging me in the side. "It'll be fun."

"They're going to a gay club, Micah," I told him quietly, gritting my teeth.

"So?"

I really didn't have an answer to that, so I sighed and nodded my head, causing the girls to let out squeals of excitement.

"Great, let's go," James urged, and we all made our way to Wren's car.

"Back seat," Wren told James as he stood at the passenger's door.

"No," James whined. "You want me to squeeze back there with all of them?"

Wren didn't even say anything. He just looked at James, refusing to unlock the car until he moved toward the back door. Eventually, James begrudgingly moved to the back, and it took me a moment to realize that Wren had meant for me to sit in the front with him. My cheeks heated in embarrassment as I opened the door and slid into the passenger's seat.

James sat behind me while Micah sat behind Wren, the two girls sitting squished in the middle of them and sharing a seatbelt at Wren's demand. I was surprised Wren was even allowing there to be an extra person in his car.

I glanced at him as he started driving, his face blank. His arm rested on the center console and his fingers tapped on the shifter. I wanted to lace my fingers with his, but I couldn't. I couldn't do it in front of the others, especially not Micah, so my hands stayed at my sides.

"Turn the music up, Wren!" Stella exclaimed from the back, and he complied. It was some pop station, probably something James had put on when they drove to the rink earlier and definitely something I had never heard in his car before.

The club was already packed by the time we got there, Wren having to circle around a bit until he found parking. The car was barely stopped when Stella, Jess, and James jumped out of the car, leaving the rest of us behind.

"They must really love this place," Micah said cheerfully.

"You have no idea," Wren replied before getting out of the car and slamming the door shut.

Micah and I shared a look before following after him. Micah stood close to me and leaned in to speak quiet enough so that Wren wouldn't hear from where he was walking ahead.

"That's Fox's brother right?" Micah asked. I nodded in confirmation. "I knew he looked familiar, but I've only seen him a couple of times. I didn't know you two were friends."

I didn't have it in me to tell him that we were more than friends. I had no idea how to admit something like that since I'd never had to before. It wasn't like Micah didn't know I was gay. We wouldn't even be in this situation if he didn't know that, but knowing it and actually seeing it were very different things. I didn't know how he would react.

So I just didn't say anything to that. I could let him believe the two of us were just friends for the night.

Wren didn't wait for us to catch up before going inside. By the time Micah and I got in there, he was already at a table in the corner, Mara on their way to bring him a water.

The club seemed louder and more vibrant than the last time I was here, but that might have been because last time I was walking around with a dark cloud over my head.

"Wow, it's great in here!" Micah shouted over the music as we sat down with Wren.

The table he chose was circular. Wren sat with his back toward the bar while Micah sat across from him facing it. I sat between the two, facing the dance floor, my back to the wall.

"Do you want a drink?" I asked Micah. He thought on it for a moment then nodded.

"Get me a soda!" he said.

I stood up and went to the bar, ordering a soda for Micah and a water for me and leaving a tip down for Mara before heading back to our seats. Micah was smiling as he was saying something to Wren, but I couldn't tell if Wren was actually listening or if Micah was being oblivious to Wren ignoring him.

"Do you guys come here often?" Micah asked as I sat down.

Wren shrugged. "Once in a while." He stared at Micah as he took a sip of his drink.

"I've only been here once," I told him.

"It kinda reminds me of back in high school when we were always trying to sneak into places like this," Micah said with a laugh. "Of course, those places were a lot less colorful and a lot more dodgy."

He said it in a light-hearted way. Micah was always light-hearted. But I still hated thinking about myself from back then. I was someone who was a lot angrier, someone who was trying so hard to hide a part of themselves that everything about me was an act. I would do anything to make my friends think I was cool back then.

And they did think I was cool until my father told everyone at church to pray for his gay son. Then I wasn't so cool anymore. I was disgusting and wrong and corrupt. I was surprised I even made it out of my senior year, but I supposed I had Micah to thank for that.

"I can't imagine Landon sneaking into a club," Wren said to Micah. "Or you if I'm being completely honest."

Micah only laughed. "I was always so paranoid about it, but Landon just led us in there like he owned the place. Sometimes I couldn't even go in. I was too nervous."

"We didn't do it that often," I muttered. I just wanted him to stop talking about back then. I didn't want Wren to know that part of me because it didn't exist anymore.

Wren glanced at me for a moment before getting up from the table, telling us he was going to the bathroom.

"This isn't really his scene, is it?" Micah asked when Wren was gone.

I sighed. "It's not mine either."

He grinned. "So the two of you just sit off to the side together while your friends have fun?"

"Pretty much," I replied, sipping on my water.

"I don't really do this much either," Micah admitted. "I go out with my friends sometimes, but I mostly stay in."

"Me too."

"I actually started seeing someone," Micah told me. "And she's the same way. We stay in together. It's nice."

"That's good," I said, not knowing how else to respond.

Micah and I never really talked about this sort of thing. That was mainly because from he time I started living with him until now, he hadn't been seeing anybody. He was spending most of his time making sure I wasn't about to have a mental breakdown.

"Are you seeing anyone?" he asked me.

I was taken so off guard that I was speechless. I just stared at him with my mouth hanging open like an idiot. I started looking anywhere but him, and that was when something caught my eye.

Wren was on his way back from the bathroom, but some guy had stopped him in his tracks. The guy was smaller than him, but his presence was large. I could feel his confidence from where I sat. He trailed his hand up Wren's arm and up to his shoulder, his fingers touching the top of his collarbone.

That was enough for me. I stood up from the table and stormed my way over to them. I couldn't even remember if I said anything to Micah before leaving. All I could think about was getting that guy away from Wren. I shoved through people as I made my way closer, and when I got there, I put my hand on Wren's shoulder and pushed him back so that the guy's hand fell away from him.

Wren and I stared into each others eyes, his looking amused while I knew mine must have looked furious.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I asked him.

"I wasn't doing anything."

"Cut the shit," I snapped, shoving him slightly.

"I was just being polite," Wren told me. His calm tone was infuriating. "I wasn't going to shove the poor guy."

"You did that on purpose."

"Did what?" Wren asked, genuinely seeming confused. "Made you jealous? That wasn't what I was going for, but I do like this side of you."

"You're so fucking-"

"Um," said a voice from behind me. I whipped my head around to see the guy was still standing there. "If it makes it any better, he was just telling me that he had someone waiting for him." He gave me an awkward smile before scurrying off into the crowd.

"See? I'm faithful," Wren said, bringing my attention back to him. "Lance, did you really think I was going to go fuck some twink in the bathroom while you were sitting over there alone with another guy?"

"No," I said, releasing him. "I don't know."

Wren grinned, grabbing my hips to bring me closer to him.

"He's not really my type," Wren said, bringing his face closer to mine. "My type is more like hot-headed hockey players with green eyes."

I scoffed, hitting him lightly on the chest. "Shut up."

"It's true," he said. "Remember last time I said I would get you out on the dance floor?"

It was like all my anger, frustration, and jealousy had faded the second he put his hands on me. With him touching me, I would do anything he wanted. I was no longer thinking of my shameful past or about anything that Micah had said earlier. All I could think about was Wren as he moved the two of us out onto the dance floor.

"I'm really only a dancer when I'm drunk," I told him as he gripped me tighter, the two of us swaying slightly while everyone around us was moving much faster to the beat.

"Oh, I remember," Wren said with a smirk, bringing his lips up the side of my neck and to my ear. "You looked so sexy dancing like that."

I shivered at his words, slightly embarrassed.

"I'm sure you can do it sober," Wren said, pulling his mouth away from me.

"Not really." There was no way I could. Not with him watching my every move, drinking me in, savoring the taste. His gaze was dark and he stared at me intensely.

We were moving so slow, but it really didn't matter. Wren's touch electrified me, made me feel like I had to use all my energy just to keep up with him.

I brought my lips up against his, brushing them together like a paintbrush against a canvas. I didn't think about the fact that we were in a room full of people and that I was kissing a man in public, out in the open where anyone could see. That didn't matter. It was peaceful, freeing, that I could do this with him, stand in the middle of a dance floor and kiss him like we were the only two here.

I never imagined this for myself, never even allowed myself to think of this as a possibility. Because if I did, I would only leave myself disappointed at the fact that this was never in the cards for me. Only it turned out that it was, that I could have this, and I didn't know how to feel. I was overwhelmed and melting against him. Wren was the only thing holding me up.

When we parted, I rested my forehead against his, felt his breath against my skin.

"That was very nice," Wren said, and I rolled my eyes, pulling away from him. He winked at me and we went back to the table with Micah.

On the ride back to the dorms, I sat in the front seat again. James was asleep in the back, his snores filling the car, and the girls were chatting with Micah. Wren and I didn't say anything. He rested his arm on the center console like before, only this time he reached over to me and placed his hand on the top of my thigh and kept it there for the whole ride. I didn't really know why, but I liked it there. I didn't want him to take his hand off of me ever.

Micah and I said our goodbyes to the others when Wren dropped us off at my dorm. I held Wren's stare for a little too long before turning and walking away from the car.

"My roommate Kyle is out for the weekend," I told Micah as we made it to my room. "He put fresh sheets on his bed and said you could use it."

"That was nice of him," Micah replied, his voice soft.

"The bathroom is out in the suite," I said, kicking my shoes off under my bed.

After a few moments of a silent stare between Micah and me, he spoke up.

"So, you and Wren, huh?" he asked.

I let out a sigh. There was no use in denying it.

"Yeah, me and Wren."

Micah grinned wider than he had all night.

"Nobody knows," I told him. "Well, only you."

"I'll keep my mouth shut," he assured me.

"Thank you."

His gaze softened. "I'm happy for you, Landon."

And those words had taken a weight off my chest.

**

Thank you for reading!

Let me know your thoughts.

30

Wren Ridley

"So when were you going to tell me you actually got with Landon?"

That was the first thing James said to me when he woke up the next morning. He was barely even coherent, still groggy from sleep and hungover.

I didn't even bother responding to him, and by the time I looked at him, he had already rolled over and started snoring again. I shook my head and directed my attention back to the book I was reading.

It was only eight in the morning. James probably wouldn't be up for another four hours. I found myself wondering when Landon would be awake. And what time his friend was leaving. Who knew what would go on with the two of them alone in his room. I didn't like the thought of it.

I gave it another hour before I got up and got dressed to head to Landon's dorm.

It was strange, feeling like I had to see him, but I didn't question myself. It had nothing to do with the fact that he had some guy in his room, possibly in his bed. Or maybe it did.

The drive to Landon's dorm was a short one, and there was no one walking around the campus as I pulled in, so I knew I'd possibly have to wait a while before someone was leaving Landon's dorm so I could get in the door.

Luckily, I only had to wait a few minutes before a group of girls walked out and held the door open for me and I made my way to Landon's room.

I knocked on his door as soon as I walked up to it, then waited a few moments and knocked again. I could hear Landon curse from behind the door before he ripped it open with a murderous glare.

His glare softened into a look of confusion as soon as he saw me. He stood there, topless, with a hand on the door. I looked past him to see his friend sitting up in Kyle's bed, then I brought my gaze back to Landon and grinned.

I leaned forward and gave him a chaste kiss.

"Good morning," I said as I pulled away.

"What are you doing here?"

"Is it a crime to want to see you?"

He narrowed his eyes at me, clearly not believing in my intentions.

"Well, are you going to let me in?" I asked, looking past him.

He stepped aside, his eyes still narrowed.

"I guess I have no choice," he said, shutting the door after I walked in.

"Good morning," the friend said, getting out of bed.

I nodded at him. "Hello."

"Are you joining us for breakfast?" he asked with a smile, looking over at Landon.

"I suppose I am," I replied.

Landon looked between us and let out a sigh before going to his closet to pull out a shirt.

"I'm going to get ready in the bathroom," the friend said before leaving the room.

"You're being weird," Landon said as soon as he was gone, pulling the shirt on over his head.

"I don't think I'm being any different than usual," I said.

"You're acting like you think there's something going on with Micah and me." That was his name. How biblical.

"I don't think that at all," I told him. However, the look on his face told me he didn't believe me.

"I thought we got all our jealously out last night," Landon said.

"Hm," I hummed, bringing my arms in to circle around his waist.

"Hm," he mimicked. "Have nothing to say about that? Are you speechless for once?"

"Not quite," I replied. "I know there's nothing going on with you two."

"Is that so?"

"Considering the fact that you looked like you wanted to beat me up last night for even talking to another guy, I would say you're not keen on sharing," I told him, earning a sheepish look from Landon. "And I'm not either, for the record."

"Good thing Micah is straight then," Landon said, narrowing his eyes at me.

"We don't know that."

Landon rolled his eyes, trying to move out of my grip. But I kept him up against me, pulling him closer.

"Are you going to let me finished getting dressed?" he asked, but didn't make another move to step away from my grasp. Instead, he leaned in and rested his face against my neck, giving me little kisses up to my jaw.

I didn't know if I'd ever get used to Landon's affection. He gave it out so rarely that it was like a new experience every time, one that I wanted to hold onto, to never let go of.

I couldn't even spend too much time enjoying the feeling of Landon's mouth on my skin before Micah opened the door and Landon sprung away from me. Landon had his back to the both of us, shuffling through the bottom drawer of his dresser to change into some jeans. He stayed right where he was to change his pants, not bothering to hide himself from Micah and me.

"So, where are we going?" Micah asked when Landon turned around. "Any good breakfast places around?"

Landon glanced at me before looking at Micah.

"I figured we could go where Wren and I usually go," Landon said, his voice trailing off. "It's a coffee place, but they have breakfast sandwiches and baked goods."

"Sounds good to me!" Micah replied, grinning at the two of us. He shared a look with Landon that I couldn't quite decipher, but by the look of embarrassment on Landon's face, I could guess that it had something to do with our situation, that Micah knew just what Landon and I were to each other.

Landon nodded his head toward the door and the three of us left the room to head out to my car. Micah walked in front of us, so I took the opportunity to put my arm around Landon's waist, letting my graze over his ass. He looked around the hallway as if worried for a moment that someone would see us, but then he relaxed. There was no one around, and even if there was, I wasn't sure if Landon would pull away from me anymore.

"You're being handsy," Landon whispered, leaning up to my ear.

"I'll stop if you want me to," I told him.

He didn't respond, so I left my hand where it was. I only released him when we walked out of the building and Micah turned to look at us, asking where my car was parked.

The drive to the coffee shop was short, but it took me a moment to find a place to park. I ended up having to parallel park a little way down the road,

and the three of us walked to the coffee shop.

It was a little busier than it usually was with it being a Sunday morning. The line for the counter was all the way to the door.

"So, what should I get here?" Micah asked the two of us. "Any suggestions?"

"I've heard the lattes are good," Landon told him with a shrug. "And the croissants."

I grinned at him, remembering the time the two of us sat in here eating croissants together.

"Wren's probably had more here than I have," Landon said, the two of them glancing at me for an answer.

"They make good breakfast sandwiches," I said. "I usually get a spinach, feta, and egg whites wrap."

"I think that's what I'll try," Micah replied. "And maybe a croissant too or a danish. I have a bit of a sweet tooth."

It was interesting to see the difference between Micah and Landon and the way they ate. Both of them were D1 athletes that had to adhere to a specific diet, yet one of them caved to their sweet tooth and the other ate like food was only a means fuel their body. It made me want to treat Landon to all the sweets, find something he really liked instead of just eating to survive.

Landon brushed the back of his hand against mine as we moved up in line. He didn't want me to grab his hand in this place full of people, but he was still showing me affection even if it was small.

We eventually got to the front of the line and Micah went ahead and ordered. As he ordered his food and drink, an idea occurred to me.

"I'll have two croissants, two spinach, feta, and egg whites wraps, and two caramel lattes," I said when it was my turn to order. Anthony wasn't working, so I wouldn't be getting my favorite customer discount.

I felt Landon place his hand on my shoulder as I went to pay.

"What are you doing?" he asked. I glanced over at him as I tapped my card on the terminal. His expression was hard and serious, like I had done something to piss him off. I was always doing something to piss him off, so this look was a familiar one.

"I ordered for you," I said, moving off to the side once I was done paying.

Landon followed me, letting his hand fall from my shoulder.

"I don't want you buying me shit," he said in a low voice. "I can pay for it myself."

"You can buy next time," I told him.

Landon let out a sigh, biting on his bottom lip.

"What the fuck kind of drink did you even get me?" he asked with a glare.

"A latte, of course."

He let out another sigh. "You're unbelievable."

"Thank you."

"That wasn't a compliment."

I grinned at him, and I could tell he was having a hard time pretending to be mad at me.

Micah found us a table, which wasn't mine and Landon's usual since it was already occupied, but we still sat how we usually did. I was facing the door, Landon was directly across from me and Micah beside him. We all sat down after we got our orders, and I watched Landon intently, waiting for him to try the latte.

"Will you stop fucking staring at me?" he snapped, causing Micah to jump a little bit in his seat.

"Try the latte," I said, motioning toward the cup in front of him.

"I'm not going to like it."

"You will," I assured him. I wasn't actually sure that he would, but I had a suspicion that Landon had a secret sweet tooth that he hadn't discovered yet, one that he was never allowed to find.

"My latte is really good," Micah said. "It's hazelnut."

"Go on," I encouraged Landon.

He looked between both Micah and me, glaring at the two of us.

"Both of you stop fucking staring at me," he said, grasping the cup in his hand.

Neither of us listened, waiting for him to finally take his first sip. Landon slowly brought the cup up to his mouth and took a sip of the latte, his face giving away nothing. He took a second sip before placing the cup back down, and that was how I knew he liked it.

"So?" Micah asked with a grin.

"It's fine," Landon casually replied.

"He likes it," I said, smirking at him.

Landon rolled his eyes and took another sip of the latte.

"I'm so glad we got together this weekend," Micah said to Landon. "Really."

"Me too," Landon agreed.

"We probably won't get to see each other again until Thanksgiving," Micah continued. "Unless you're spending that at Wren's."

Landon's eyes widened.

I laughed. "I don't think so."

Landon frowned at me and Micah had a look of confusion on his face. That was how I knew I had said the wrong thing. But I didn't know what else he wanted me to say.

"Oh, well, maybe you could join us at some point," Micah offered, Landon's mouth still turned in a frown. If eyes could frown, I would say his were doing just that.

I shrugged, not knowing if Landon would even want that.

We all finished a few minutes later and got up from the table to go. As we stood, Landon made eye contact with someone who had just walked in. I recognized him as one of the people I saw Landon with that night he got left alone at the bar. I could feel the anger radiating off of Landon as the two of them glared at each other. Clearly, there was something going on between the two of them.

"Who was that?" I asked Landon as soon as we were outside.

"He's from my hockey team," he muttered, following behind Micah back to my car.

"And you two don't like each other?"

"Why would you think that?" he asked.

"I could tell how angry you were when you saw him," I said, raising my eyebrows at him. He should know by now how well I knew him.

"It's nothing," Landon said, not even looking at me. "Just drop it." Well, that was not at all suspicious.

I dropped it for that moment, driving back to Landon's dorm for Micah to get his things. Then, I drove the two of them to the train station so that Micah could catch the train back to Boston.

I watched as Landon got out of the car with Micah while I stayed parked in front of the doors of the station. The two of them exchanged some words, then shared a tight, long hug. Longer than I liked, but I pushed that to the back of my mind. Micah sent one last wave toward me before heading into the train station.

Landon got back into the car and buckled up. I turned to him, staring at his expression, trying to figure out what he was thinking.

"What?" he asked when he noticed my staring.

"Do you want to come over?"

Landon nodded, and so I brought us back to my dorm room where James was still asleep.

Landon scoffed, shaking his head when he saw him.

"I thought he'd be awake by now," I said, going over to my closet and pulling out Landon's hockey sweatshirt I had taken from him. I threw the sweatshirt on and walked back over to Landon, who was now sitting on my bed.

"I think I'll have to steal one of yours," he said. "If you're going to keep mine." He took one of the strings on the front of the sweatshirt, looping it around his finger.

I shrugged. "I wouldn't mind." I leaned forward and placed my lips on his.

"Well, well, well," James said from behind us, sitting up on the bed with his arms crossed.

I turned around with a blank expression.

"Glad to see you're alive," I said. "It's about time you woke up."

"Don't try to make this about me," James retorted. "When were you guys going to tell me you were together?"

"Whenever it became your business."

"It is my business!"

"How exactly?"

"Because we're friends and I'm nosy." He said it like it was the obvious answer. Because, *of course* , I should have known that James had to know when I decided to be with someone.

Landon hopped off the bed, moving to go sit at my desk.

"Who else knows?" James asked, jumping down from his own bed.

"I don't know," I told him truthfully. Any number of people could know, especially with the way we behaved at the club the night before.

James shook his head, muttering something under his breath as he got his shower things together. He threw a towel over his shoulder and left the room. Landon scowled at the door where he left.

"He's just being annoying because he's nosy," I told him.

I could tell by the look on Landon's face that he was thinking about my history with James, thinking that James would still want to hook up with me even though he knew that I was with Landon, that I possibly wouldn't say no.

"Stop," I said, standing in front of Landon and blocking his view of the door.

He looked up at me from where he sat at my desk.

"Stop what?"

"Stop thinking about me and James," I said. "There is nothing going on and there won't be anything going on."

Landon seemed to relax a little bit at my words. All he needed was the reassurance. I could relate to that.

Before either of us could say anything else, my phone started ringing. I somehow must have put the sound on because my phone was usually on silent. I pulled the phone out of my pocket to see that it was my brother Robin calling. I wouldn't normally answer, but Robin was the type to spam my phone until I picked it up. It was easier to just get it over with now.

I held my finger to my lips, signaling for Landon to be quiet before answering Robin's FaceTime.

"What's up," I answered as Robin's face came up on the screen.

"Hey! You answered!" he exclaimed.

"Didn't feel like having two hundred missed calls on my phone."

Robin laughed. "You know me so well."

"What's up, Rob?" I repeated, hoping he would just get to the point.

"So, I just booked my flight for Thanksgiving, which was a *shit ton* of money on Dad's travel card."

"Okay, when are you flying in?"

"That Wednesday afternoon. I was hoping you could pick me up. I'm flying into Providence."

"Sure."

"Cool, thanks. Anyway, what's up? Anything going on?" he asked.

"No, not really." I just wanted to speed this up, but he loved to stay on the phone for hours.

"What's with that sweatshirt?" Rob asked, squinting at the screen. "Providence College Hockey?"

"Thrifted it," I lied.

Robin laughed. "You're so full of shit. That looks way too new to be thrifted and you don't even like hockey."

I snuck a glance at Landon who was staring at me with wide eyes.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you," I said to Robin. "But I gotta go."

"I see, don't want to talk to your big bro," Robin said, feigning like he was upset. "I'll see you soon then. Only two weeks away."

It didn't dawn on me until then that Thanksgiving was so close. It was only two weeks until my whole family would come to Providence to watch Fox play hockey, that I would have to watch Fox play against Landon and possibly try to beat the shit out of him.

All we had was two weeks before we had to see how this would play out.

**

Thanks for reading! Getting close to Fox vs Landon game!

31

Landon Reilly

I woke up Monday morning with Wren's back to my chest, my arms around him. It was such a strange position to be in, really. I had never known this kind of affection, never sought after it. But somehow, without me realizing it, it became so easy with Wren. Despite how hard it was to get here, to be in this place with him, with my own resistance of him and with his own walls that he rarely let me see through.

I couldn't pinpoint the exact moment that our relationship became this, or when the way I felt about him changed. It seemed to just happen. One day I wanted to wring his neck and the next I wanted to kiss it.

This whole thing was new territory for me, and part of me knew that it couldn't last, that there would be a day this ended whether I was ready for it or not. I tried to push that to the back of my mind. I was always making myself miserable, I didn't want to be miserable about this.

After a few moments of being awake, I turned over to check the time, Wren turning over with me and wrapping his arms around my waist.

When I saw the time, I pulled myself from Wren's grasp and got out of bed, scrambling to get ready. It was eight o'clock. I barely had time to go back to my dorm and get to class for the exam I had.

I opened up Wren's closet, pulling out a brown crewneck sweatshirt with BROWN written across the chest in white letters. I threw the sweatshirt on and debated taking a pair of pants to change into.

"What are you doing?" Wren grumbled, his voice low and gravely from sleep. He sat up in bed, squinting at me.

"I have to get to class," I said.

I closed his closet and walked over to him, kissing him lightly before turning to rush out of the room.

He was up and following me, throwing on my hockey sweatshirt, before I could even get out of the room.

"I'll drive you," he said with a yawn.

The two of us went down to Wren's car, letting it warm up for a few minutes before he started driving toward my campus. Wren stopped at a drive through about half way there.

"What are you doing?" I asked him.

"You didn't eat breakfast," he said, pulling up to the speaker before I could say anything else. He ordered a breakfast sandwich and a caramel latte.

"I thought I told you I don't need you buying my shit."

Wren just shrugged, ignoring me before getting up to the window and paying for breakfast. He handed me the bag with the sandwich in it and placed the latte in the cup holder.

Wren didn't seem to be much of a talker after having been abruptly woken up. His eyes were still full of sleep, his face a little pale.

When he pulled up to my dorm building, I hesitated for a moment before leaning over the center console to give him a brief kiss. It felt so strange to do, but at the same time felt like it was as easy as breathing, like it was what I was supposed to do. I glanced around the area, seeing that there was no one around to witness it.

"I'll see you later," I told him, opening the door to get out of the car.

Wren just nodded, rubbing his tired eyes.

I grabbed the sandwich and latte then closed the door behind me and made my way to the dorm. Kyle was already gone when I got there, probably at his own morning class.

I ate the breakfast and drank the latte before going to the bathroom to brush my teeth and get ready. After gathering my things, I went to class. I had forgotten about wearing Wren's sweatshirt until I got to class and Jess was looking at me with a confused expression, pointing at my chest as I sat down.

"Wren's?" she asked.

I hummed in confirmation to which she smirked.

"Interesting," Jess said.

I had no interest in getting into my bizarre relationship with Wren with her. She must have seen us at the club the other night, or at least heard about it from James.

Once I was finished with my exam, I left the lecture hall. Livi had sent me a text while I was in class that she would be calling me. Almost as soon as I sent the message that I was done with class, the unknown number she was texting me from popped up on my screen.

"Hello?" I answered, speed walking to get back to my dorm.

"Hey, I'm in my free period," she said. "And I feel like I haven't talked to you in a while."

I winced at that. "Yeah, it's been a bit. How is everything?"

"Oh, you know, same as always," Livi replied. "Mom and Dad drive me nuts and I miss you."

My heart hurt at the thought of Livi missing me. I wanted her to go unaffected by the way our parents treated me, but I knew that was unrealistic. The whole thing was hard on her and I felt absolutely powerless in being able to help her through it, though she was strong and could handle things a lot better than I could.

"I miss you too," I told her.

"You'll visit me on Thanksgiving, right?"

I hated to promise anything to her, knowing the high likelihood that any promise I made could be broken. Sometimes things couldn't work out, and it would leave both of us disappointed, and I hated disappointing her.

"I'll definitely try," I said. "Do you still have that iPod I gave you?"

The last time I went home for her, I had dug out an old iPod of mine so that she could text me from it without our parents knowing. She had texted me a few times from it, but the problem was she had to be home to use it, and with her schedule she didn't have a lot of time.

"Yeah, I have it," she replied. "I literally hollowed out one of my books to hide it in so Mom wouldn't find it when she snoops through my room."

My face scrunched in confusion. "How the hell did you get that idea?"

"Wren." She said it so nonchalantly that I almost didn't find it odd. That was until I realized that meant my little sister had been talking to my... whatever Wren was without me knowing.

"My Wren?" I asked, cringing as soon as the question came out of my mouth.

"Who else?"

"Since when have you been talking to him?" I asked, bewildered.

"I don't know, since he gave me his number?" Her tone was sarcastic like any other teenage girl's. "I texted him so he would have mine. Just in case."

"Just in case what?"

"It just makes me feel better to be able to contact someone who knows you in case I can't contact you," she said, her voice softer now.

I tried not to let myself be agitated by the fact that Livi and Wren were communicating. If it made Livi feel better, then it was fine with me. That

didn't stop it from turning my stomach over. I wanted to know what they talked about, or rather, what they said about me.

"Okay, it's still weird," I muttered, finally back at my dorm building.

"It's not weird! I can talk to your friend," Livi said with a laugh.

Friend. So he hadn't said anything to her about what really were. Whatever that was. Official, but not. Exclusive, but without any real label to represent that exclusivity.

Just together.

***

A couple days later, I went on my normal running route in the morning, heading toward the coffee shop and hoping Wren would be there. I had seen him the night before, but we didn't do a lot of talking, so I didn't know for sure if he would be there this morning. Our mouths were busy with other things.

When I got to the coffee shop, Wren was sitting in his usual spot with his laptop open, drowning out everything around him as he typed away.

"Hey," Anthony greeted when I walked up to the counter, making me tear my gaze from Wren.

"Hey," I said back.

"Can I get you your usual?"

I hesitated for a moment. "Can I get a caramel latte?"

Anthony looked at me strangely, looked over at Wren and then back to me before putting in my order.

"What's going on with you and Wren?" Anthony asked as I paid.

I stared at him, unsure of what to say. I didn't want other people in our business. It was one thing to let Micah know, along with Wren's friends and Jess. Those were people we were around all the time and it would be hard to hide it from them. But to tell Anthony was something completely different. I just wanted the two of us to be left alone.

"You know him and James fuck each other right?" Anthony asked when I didn't say anything. "Just be careful if you're involved with him."

I was fuming when I walked away from the counter, and I nearly broke my cup when the barista handed it to me from gripping it so hard. Wren was so engrossed in whatever he was doing that he didn't even notice me sit down until I pushed his laptop closed.

"What did I do?" Wren asked when he saw my expression.

"Did you tell Anthony about us?" I asked, and he shot me a look of confusion.

"No," he replied. "Why?"

I couldn't tell him that Anthony had warned me about Wren's past with James. Wren already knew I was insecure about that, and he had reassured me more than once that there was nothing going on between them anymore. I didn't want him to know that the insecurity still lingered.

"He just asked me about it," I muttered, taking a sip of my scalding latte and cursing as it burnt my tongue.

"What did he say?' he asked. "Let me guess, he wanted to know if you knew about me and James."

I glared at him. I hated how he knew everything, and how I would never understand how he did it.

He grinned, taking my expression as confirmation.

"Anthony is insecure and still hung up on James just as much as James is hung up on him," Wren said, sipping on his drink.

"What, did James cheat on him with you?"

Wren shrugged. "That, I don't know. Don't really care either. I don't know the precise timeline of their relationship. And if he did, that's on James, not me."

I nodded, not interested in talking about this anymore.

"Anyway, what are you doing tonight?" Wren asked after a moment.

"Therapy and hockey practice."

"How about you come over after practice," Wren suggested. "I'll kick James out for the night. I told him I'll need the room for a night this week anyway since you're going away this weekend."

I had almost forgotten I was going away for hockey this weekend, but of course, Wren didn't forget.

"Where does he even go when you kick him out?"

"Sometimes Stella's, but if she has Jess over, I don't know where he goes," Wren said. "He has a lot of friends. I don't think it's hard for him to find somewhere to go."

And so I agreed to spend the night in Wren's room once again.

Therapy was difficult like always, and I was mentally drained by the time I left. Part of me wanted to skip out on practice, but I knew I couldn't if I wanted to play this weekend. But if Cooper or any of his stupid friends did anything to make me mad, I would blow up.

When I stepped onto the ice, I could feel eyes on me. I was late like I was every time I had therapy. It was only once a week, but Cooper had already voiced how he thought I was getting special treatment, and it seemed like he had others convinced that I was.

I was getting glares from teammates I had never even spoken to, let alone done anything to make them hate me. But that was what happened when

you were a recluse and someone like Cooper wanted to make you their enemy. He was social. It was no wonder he had gotten his own little group to crowd around him like he was their king and they were his subjects.

So when practice was over, I didn't even bother showering there. I just grabbed my things and went back to my dorm to shower and get my things to spend the night with Wren. The last thing I needed was Cooper or one of his pawns trying to pick a fight with me.

After I showered, I threw on some new clothes along with Wren's sweatshirt and waited for him to pick me up. He could tell I was angry as soon as he saw me.

"What has upset you?" Wren asked, glancing over at me. I leaned my head back on the headrest, turning to look at him. He was looking at me intently, no amusement on his face.

"Therapy was rough," I told him, letting out a long sigh.

"Hm," Wren hummed, pulling away from the curb.

His hand traveled across the center console to rest on my leg. I liked the feeling of his hand there while he drove, and I never wanted him to stop doing it. It was affection in a simple form, a small gesture that felt much larger.

He didn't say anything else or try to guess what had gone on in therapy, and for that I was grateful. Wren tended to turn his overly analytical brain off when it came to my therapy sessions, or he just didn't let his analysis of me come pouring out of his mouth. He left that alone like even he knew that bringing it up would be going too far. And I had once thought he had no boundaries.

"Come relax," Wren said when we got into his room. We kicked off our shoes and got in his bed. He lay down first, then I took my spot beside him, letting his arm come around me while I laid my head on his chest. I felt so comfortable there against him like this was a place I could be where nothing else mattered.

When he turned on an audio book, I let out a groan.

"Seriously?" I asked him, looking up at his face from my spot on his chest.

"It can be relaxing, listening to a story," he said, running his fingers through my hair. "Just listen. I know you don't read, so you need some kind of literature in your life."

I sighed, but listened anyway. Wren kept playing with my hair and I could feel myself dozing off with the combination of the feeling of Wren's fingers in my hair, his chest rising and falling beneath my head, and the sound of the whimsical words coming from his phone.

"This book is confusing," I mumbled against his chest.

"You're supposed to be confused at this point," he said. "Sometimes these things don't come together until the end."

After a few chapters, he shut the book off and his hand started wandering down my body. It left my hair and went down my back, his fingers finding their way under the waistband of my pants. Now I was wide awake, forgetting I was even feeling tired a moment ago.

"I've been thinking," Wren started, his fingers moving lower.

"You're always thinking," I responded, letting out a shaky breath.

He laughed, turning slightly so that we could face each other. Wren leaned forward, catching my mouth in a kiss. He turned, moving me so that I was flat on my back as he hovered over me, his mouth moving faster against mine. I brought my hand up to the back of his head, pulling him against me as I opened my mouth for him. Wren pulled up my shirt, his hands moving up my stomach. His lips were face but precise, moving at a pace that matched my own. His tongue pushed against mine lightly, as if luring me to take charge. So that was what I did.

I grabbed onto Wren's hips and turned us over so that I was now on top of him, my legs straddling his waist. Wren let out a moan at the movement,

pulling his mouth away from mine. I took the opportunity to kiss his neck. Wren took in a sharp breath when my lips brushed over his sensitive skin. The noises he made drove me wild. I could barely even think straight.

Wren brought his hand to the back of my head as I continued exploring his neck. My mouth moved up to his jaw, and Wren shuddered beneath me.

"Landon," Wren said, his voice raspy and quiet. I almost didn't hear him.

I pulled away from him briefly to look at his face. Wren was staring at me intensely, his pupils blown wide.

"I want you," Wren said, staring right into my eyes. "I want..."

I didn't know where he was going with this or what to make of it, so I brought my mouth back to his neck, peppering it with kisses.

"What do you want?" I asked him, my mouth against his skin.

"I want you to..." He paused. "Fuck me."

I almost jumped off of him at his words. My mouth stilled against him and I sat up, staring down at him. I had never seen Wren look so vulnerable. He always seemed like he was in control of every situation, and was never willing to give up that control. But the look he was giving me told a different story. He wasn't in control of this. I was. He put the ball in my court. He wanted me, but it was up to me if we went through with it.

Maybe that was why I said yes without thinking much about it, despite the fact that I had never done this before. But I couldn't say no to him. I had never felt like I had much control in my life at all, but here he was, giving that to me, wanting me to make this choice for us. He was ready and willing, all I had to do was say yes.

"I've never..." I started.

"I know you've never had sex with a guy," Wren interjected. "I'll get myself ready."

I thought he would leave the room to do whatever he needed to do, but he stayed as if he actually wanted me to watch him get himself ready.

My breath was uneven as I watched him. It was obscene, but I couldn't look away. I could tell that he liked that I was watching him. There was a certain gleam in his eye.

Watching him distracted me from all my insecurities about the whole ordeal, at least until he was ready and beckoning me over. That was when I went into panic mode.

Wren knew I had never done this with a guy, but he didn't know that I had never had sex at all.

And then there was the fact that I often had my father's voice creeping into the back of my mind telling how wrong I was, how disgusting and shameful I was.

Those thoughts were shoved further back into my mind when Wren grabbed me and started undressing me. He started kissing me on my exposed skin. He kissed down my chest and to my stomach, then pushed me down onto the bed and kissed my inner thighs. Wren looked up at me, making eye contact the whole time his lips were on my skin.

"Can I start on top?" Wren asked, sitting up on the tops of my thighs.

"Yes."

He had lube and condoms ready, already having used the lube on himself. He stroked me, allowing me to harden before rolling the condom on and using some more lube on me.

My thoughts were going a mile a minute at this point. I was overwhelmed with feelings every time he touched me.

Wren lowered himself onto me and I was completely blissed out. My hands found their way to his hips before one moved to stroke him as he moved on

top of me. The two of us shared eye contact the whole time, and I had never experienced anything like this in my life.

I never knew I could have this level of intimacy with someone, thinking it was never in the cards for me and that I was to be alone forever. But Wren changed that and let me have these experiences.

It was strange to feel emotional about having sex, but I was feeling that way anyway. There was nobody but Wren on my mind. Nothing could ruin this for me.

When we both finished, Wren was breathless. He lifted himself off of me then tucked himself under my arm, kissing my bare chest before staring at my face like he was trying to read my emotions. Of course, he was.

"That was hot," I said, my breathing heavy.

Wren laughed, and I knew my orgasm high was making me crazy because I thought it was the most adorable thing in the world.

"It was," Wren agreed. "I'm glad you didn't hate it."

I couldn't hate it despite the sinking feeling in my stomach. Even though I wasn't in contact with him anymore, I still had this fear of my father finding out, about what he would say or do to me. It was an irrational fear at this point, but it was still there nonetheless.

"I've never done that before," I told him.

"I know."

"No, I mean like at all," I said. "With guys or girls."

I didn't know why I felt the need to tell him this. Maybe it was because I just wanted him to know that this moment was important to me. Or maybe I wanted him to know that there were no others before him.

That was the one thing I had never let myself do with the girls I was with. I had made out with girls, let them blow me or give me a hand job, but I had

never gone all the way with them, despite the fact that I was trying to use them to make myself straight. I didn't want to give any of them that part of me.

"Oh," he said. "Well, if I had known that I would've have made it more special. Maybe would've lit a candle or something."

I laughed, despite feeling queasy and on edge. He could read my emotions too easily, and I didn't want him to notice how uneasy I felt.

"There's always next time," he said with a grin. And I laughed again.

**

Thanks for reading!

32

Landon Reilly

If I knew that Coach Foreman was going to have me rooming with Cooper for our away game, I would have faked an illness or something to get out of it. But since I didn't know that beforehand, I was stuck here and sharing a small space with someone I absolutely loathed. Coach didn't know what he had done when he made this rooming arrangement because there was a chance Cooper wouldn't make it out of here alive if he decided to push me.

I was dreading having to go back to the room. Once the game finished, I took my time getting out of my gear and heading to the showers, but Coach was rushing us, seeming to be in a bad mood even though we won our game. I sat on the bus with Rojas, putting my headphones in and ignoring everyone around me. Rojas had actual friends on the team, but he always insisted on sitting with me. He just waned me to feel included, and he didn't understand that sometimes I just wanted to be left alone. I couldn't let myself get too annoyed at him. He was the only one on the team that I really talked to.

When I got back to the hotel room, it was empty, no sign of Cooper. I flipped the light on and put my stuff down next to my bed. As if sensing that I had just gotten to the room, I got a text from Wren.

From: Wren

Don't forget to check the bed for bed bugs.

To: Wren

already did

From: Wren

Did you pull up the sheets and check the seams of the mattress?

To: Wren

yes dad

From: Wren

You can call me Daddy if you're into that.

My face flushed as I read his text, and I let out a short laugh.

To: Wren

you wish

Wren had been texting me more than usual since I left for the weekend. He missed me, though he would never admit it. And I wouldn't mention it because I was afraid that if I did, the texts would stop. I would need his presence if I were to get through this night in the same room as Cooper.

A few moments later, the door opened and Cooper walked into the room. He didn't even look my way as he set his bags down and went into the bathroom. Good. The least amount of interaction the two of us had the better.

When he was done in the bathroom, I went in to get ready for bed, the two of us sidestepping each other so that we wouldn't make contact. Cooper finally spoke up when I was pulling back the covers to get into bed.

"So..." Cooper trailed.

I looked back at him briefly before getting into bed.

"We don't need to speak," I said, moving to turn off the lamp on my side of the room.

"This feels kinda awkward, man," Cooper said.

I scoffed, not even bothering to respond. It was his fault if he felt awkward. He was the one who forced himself on me, it was him who got all of his

friends to gang up on me. It had everything to do with him and nothing to do with me. People like him had a hard time not being liked, so they would do anything to gain the favor of the many even if they had to step on the few to get there. People like me didn't care about being liked. He couldn't stand that.

"I just wanna say... I'm, you know," he started. "I'm sorry about what happened. I've been feeling kinda guilty about it."

Again, I didn't respond. He might have felt guilty, but it didn't matter. He would still step on me for the favor of his friends. It wouldn't change the fact that he kissed me without my consent. But was I really any different than Cooper? I felt guilty over everything I had done to Elijah, but that guilt wouldn't make it all go away. I still did those things, still hurt him. And he had to live with that hurt forever, even if he moved on and forgave me.

It was the same with my father. If he ever felt remorse for everything he had done to me, would it change anything? It wouldn't. I knew it wouldn't. But he would never feel guilty or ask for my forgiveness. Not the way I craved Elijah's forgiveness. So maybe my father was a different story. He was a vile man who hurt his children because he wanted them to be his perfect creations like he was God or something. I hurt Elijah because of that man, because he made me hate myself, hate Elijah.

And maybe Cooper was just like me in a way. Maybe he had his own self hatred that caused him to hurt others the way I did in the past. And maybe if he wanted forgiveness, the same way I did, I should give that to him.

"I'm also feeling guilty because I may have told the guys about what happened, but that you were the one who came onto me," Cooper added with a sheepish look, his eyes cast downward like he couldn't bear to see the look on my face at his confession.

My head snapped toward him and I was seeing red as I stared at him with a look of anger and disgust. All thoughts of forgiveness for him were thrown out the window at that moment.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I snapped.

He looked over at me, his face red with embarrassment.

"They were starting to ask me why I suddenly had a problem with you," he explained. "It was easier to tell them that you had done something to me than it was to admit I was embarrassed about what I did to you."

I was beyond livid. I could barely think, and I couldn't remember the last time I had felt this angry. I surprised even myself at the restraint I showed by not going over there and punching Cooper in the face. It seemed like he expected me to by the way he was looking at me.

I shoved my pillow over my face and let out a strangled yell to release some anger. My hands were in fists, begging me to let them hit something, but I held back and took deep breaths.

"Dude, I'm sorry," Cooper said. "Hit me or something if it's going to make you feel better."

I threw the pillow down on the bed and turned to glare at him.

"If you want to stop feeling guilty, then tell your friends the truth and keep my fucking name out of your mouth for the rest of your life."

I couldn't even look at him anymore, so I turned to face away from him and willed myself into sleep.

***

Wren Ridley

The traffic was horrible getting to the airport, and I was starting to question why I agreed to pick Robin up in the first place. There were a million cars doing the same thing, and there was nowhere for me to sit and wait for him without parking, so I had to go around a few times until he was finally outside waiting for me.

Robin threw his bag in the back seat before getting into the car with a wide grin on his face.

"Why are you so happy?" I asked him as I started driving.

"Because I'm happy to see you," he said, nudging my arm with his elbow.

"How was the flight?"

"Snoozed the whole way," Robin replied, leaning back in his seat. "My neck kinda hurts now though."

Robin was the type that could sleep anywhere. There was one time I had caught him falling asleep standing up.

"Anyway, what's going on with you?" Rob asked.

"Nothing," I replied with a sigh. We were sitting in traffic again.

"Well, you were being weird the last few times we talked on the phone," he continued. "So I don't think it's nothing."

Rob was perceptive. He always knew when something was going on, and he was one of the only people that could read me well. I always had to have my guard up around him or else he would pull truths out of me like it was nothing.

"I don't understand how I was being weird," I told him as we inched forward slightly in the traffic. "I'm just being the way that I am. Maybe you just think I'm weird."

"Well, you are. But you were being a different weird," he said. "Like how you got all weird on the phone with Fox when he was talking about fighting that kid, and the hockey sweatshirt. Like, I'm not an idiot. I can make the connection."

"There is no connection to be made," I retorted.

"And you're getting defensive about it, so I really know there's something going on."

I didn't respond to him for a moment. I had no idea what Robin thought was going on, but he was obviously adamant about something.

Fox was still the only person in my family that I had told about my sexuality, but I always had a feeling that Robin knew even without me telling him. And like the good brother he was, he didn't say anything about it, unlike me when I had the same revelation about Fox. It felt like this was the moment he would finally confront me about it. He had a feeling about what was going on with me, and he wanted me to admit his suspicions were true.

"What do you want me to say, Rob?" I asked him after a few moments of him staring at me, waiting for my rebuttal.

Robin let out a sigh, then smiled at me, pretending like we weren't just arguing.

"Nothing you don't want to, Wren," he said.

We didn't talk about it for the rest of the ride. However, I knew that if I did confess my relationship to Robin, he would be supportive. And if I asked him to keep it from Fox, he would. But I still couldn't find it in me to tell him.

It felt like my life at school and my life at home were two different lives altogether. I didn't want to mix the two or change the way my family looked at me. My parents were supportive of Fox, but I still had an irrational fear that they wouldn't accept me, that they wouldn't understand bisexuality and wouldn't want another son that was interested in men.

When Robin and I finally got back to the house after what seemed like forever, our parents came running outside like they spent the last hour staring out the window and waiting for us to arrive. They practically knocked Robin over as they both pulled him in for a hug. They were both talking fast about how much they missed him and how happy they were that he decided to come home for Thanksgiving.

"And of course we're happy to see you too, baby," Mom said as I got out of the car, still holding onto Robin like he would slip away if she let go. It was Dad who came over to me, pulling me into his arms.

"It's going to be the best having us all here together," Dad said, squeezing me tighter.

Eventually, we all made it into the house and my siblings attached themselves to Robin like they hadn't seen him in ten years. Fox was noticeably absent.

"Where's Fox?" I asked.

"He has hockey practice this afternoon," Mom replied. "He's not going to be here until tonight. Him and Elijah are taking the train home."

I went up to my bedroom after greeting my siblings and sent a text to Landon.

To: Landon

How are you getting home?

From: Landon

micahs dad is picking me up

did you make it home ok?

To: Landon

Yes. Just got home with Rob.

I hadn't seen much of Landon this week, which was disappointing. He had an away game over the weekend, so I only saw him briefly on Sunday night and then again briefly on Monday and Tuesday morning at the coffee shop.

From: Landon

will i be able to see you at some point tomorrow? im supposed to hang out with livi, but you can come with if you want I was glad he asked so that I didn't have to, though I wasn't too proud to let him know I wanted to see him.

To: Landon

Yes. I can pick you two up after dinner.

It wasn't until the next day I actually saw Fox. He didn't get back in town until late, so he spent the night at Elijah's and came home Thanksgiving morning.

"Where's your better half?" I asked him when I walked into the kitchen that morning. The cooking had already started, so our parents were in the kitchen tending to the food while Fox sat at the table with a cup of coffee and a bowl of cereal.

"It's so good to see you too," Fox sarcastically replied.

I grabbed a mug from the cabinet and filled it with coffee before sitting across from my brother at the table.

"That's not an answer," I said.

"He's at his house."

"Are you two fighting?" I asked.

Fox glared at me. "Shut the fuck up. No, we're not."

"No need to bite my head off," I said, sipping my coffee.

"It's hard not to when you get off on being irritating."

I chuckled at him. "You seem extra grumpy today. What can your big brother do to make it better?"

Fox held back a laugh, his expression softening from its hard glare. The two of us weren't nearly as close with each other as we were with our other siblings, but we were working on it. Fox and I clashed so much growing up, which was mostly me being awful to him. I was surprised he even wanted to forgive me for that.

"My big brother can try being normal for once," Fox said with a pointed look.

"Hm. I don't think so. That would be very boring, wouldn't it?" I replied.

The two of us moved to the living room, where Robin and Raven were, after breakfast.

"I still have yet to see your apartment," Robin said to his twin as they faced each other on the couch.

Raven shrugged. "It's not much and I share it with three other people, so you're not missing anything."

"I still would like to see it," Robin said. "Have you two seen it?"

Fox and I nodded.

"Who do you think was forced to help her move in?" Fox asked.

Raven scoffed. "You say that like *I* didn't help you move in at school."

I pulled my phone out and drowned out my siblings' bickering.

To: Landon

When can I pick you up tonight?

From: Landon

ill let you know, still waiting to hear from livi

you don't have to come with us if you dont want to. i know you might not want to hang out with my little sister To: Landon

When have I ever done something I didn't want to do?

From: Landon

good point

wanna see yu anyway

To: Landon

Your grammar is atrocious.

From: Landon

you like correcting me anyway like ur my teacher or something

want me to call you professor?

I laughed at that, momentarily forgetting where I was. And of course, Fox noticed. He shot me a strange look and glanced down at my phone. Raven and Robin were too busy talking to each other to notice anything, but Fox was putting the pieces together.

"Who are you texting?" he asked me, trying to grab at my phone. I quickly locked it and shoved it into my pocket before he could see anything. The last thing I needed was Fox finding out about Landon when I had to spend the whole weekend with him.

"My roommate," I lied with a blank expression.

"Your roommate," Fox said, not sounding convinced. He leaned closer to me so that the others wouldn't be able to hear. "Are you talking to a guy? Is that why you're being so defensive?"

"Fox," I said in a warning tone. The two of us used to brawl over less than this, and while we showed more restraint now, he could still push my

buttons just as I could his.

"Do Mom and Dad still not know?" he whispered.

"Fox, shut up right now," I snapped.

He was silent for a moment then he let out a sigh and backed off.

"You can tell me if you are, you know," he said quietly. "And you should really tell Mom and Dad."

I didn't bother responding. If I kept the conversation going, he would only push me even more. I needed to end it right then and there.

Later on that night after dinner, I left the house to go pick up Landon. He was waiting outside the Hanson's house when I pulled up, his hands in the pocket of his sweatshirt. I leaned over and kissed him when he got in the car.

"I'm glad you came," Landon said, my face still close to his. His cheeks were slightly pink from the cold air outside.

"Well, I did want to see you," I told him. "And we probably won't be able to see each other after this until the end of the weekend." He had hockey games on Friday and Saturday, and I would be with my family until Saturday night.

Landon was quiet for a moment, and I had to think back on what I said, wondering if I had upset him. But nothing I said could have upset him. He was nervous about something.

"You could... you could stay over tonight," Landon said, looking at me briefly before diverting his eyes. "If you want."

I chuckled. "And risk running into your friend's parents?"

He glanced at me, his expression sharp, eyes narrowed and dark like a storm was brewing up inside them.

"They wouldn't care," Landon said.

"It was bad enough we had a run in with my parents," I reminded him. "That was when you still hated me."

He didn't even crack a smile at that, so I must have said the wrong thing.

"Never mind," he said with a sigh, slumping back in his seat.

Part of me wanted to push him to tell me what bothered him, but I also didn't want to make him even more upset with me.

"Where are we picking up your sister?" I asked.

"At the ice rink."

I started driving there with Landon directing me. I remembered the way from the time we drove there while his sister was missing, but I let him tell me the way anyway.

Livi was standing outside the back of the ice rink when I pulled up, her hands tucked in her sweatshirt pocket and her hair up in a tight, neat bun. Her face lit up when she saw us and she rushed over to the car.

"Hi guys!" Livi exclaimed as she sat down in the back seat.

"You are considerably cleaner than the last time I saw you," I told her, turning around to face her.

Livi giggled at that. "You saw me at my worst," she said.

Landon turned around to see his sister, a smile sprouting on his face.

"Where to?" he asked her.

"Can we go get ice cream, *please?"* Livi begged. "I haven't had ice cream since the last time we went!"

Landon looked to me. "We can go to that diner. You know the one where-"

"I know the one," I interjected, putting the car in drive.

I remembered that day I saw him with his sister while I was out with Fox, Elijah, Fawn, and Ava. Fox shot daggers at him with his eyes and Landon booked it out of there like the place was on fire.

Livi was talking a mile a minute to her brother the whole way to the diner, updating him on her life at home and at school. Apparently her and her boyfriend Jimmy were on a break but she was certain they'd get back together.

She was still talking as we walked into the diner. Landon brushed his hand against mine lightly, keeping his eyes on his sister. His pinky moved back and forth against my hand.

Livi only stopped her long winded story long enough for her to order her ice cream and then she was back at it.

Landon's attention drifted from his sister, so I followed his gaze to where it landed.

Across the diner was Elijah and his non-hockey friends from high school.

Elijah with his look of confusion mixed with bewilderment was looking right at us.

**

Thanks for reading!

33

Wren Ridley

My feet carried me over to where Elijah was sitting without giving me a chance to really think about what I wanted to say to him. What could I say other than: please don't tell Fox?

Elijah's friends looked at me when I approached the table while Elijah was already getting up like he knew I was going to take him away.

"It appears we need to talk," I said. "Excuse us."

I led Elijah away from his friends to a table in a secluded corner. He didn't say anything as we walked together, but I heard him let out a sigh from behind me.

"This is a bit of a predicament, isn't it?" I said as the two of us sat down across from each other.

Elijah looked at me with exasperation, his wide eyes staring intently like he wanted to burn me with his gaze.

"I'm really trying hard not to be pissed off at you right now," Elijah said in a low tone.

"Are you pissed at me?"

"Kinda!" he replied.

I knew it wasn't because of the fact that I was with Landon. He didn't even know anything about what the two of us were for each other. He was angry that he was put in the position where he had to decide if he had to keep something from Fox.

"Tell Fox if you need to," I started. "But I don't think you do."

Elijah glared at me. "What's going on with you and Landon? Are you just friends or is it something more?"

We were both silent for a moment, then Elijah put his hand up to stop me before I even made the move to say anything.

"You know what, the less I know about this the better," he said. "The less I know, the less pissed off Fox can be at me when he inevitably finds out."

"So you won't tell him?"

"You're putting me in a really awkward position!" Elijah said in a fierce tone. "Tell Fox and he's going to be pissed at you when he's trying to have a better relationship with you, or don't tell him and he's pissed at me when he finds out I knew."

"He doesn't have to find out that you know anything," I told him. "You don't really know anything anyway."

"There's this thing in a relationship called trust. I know you know nothing about that, but I can't lie to him and tell him I knew nothing when he eventually finds out."

"He won't find out anything," I assured him. "There's nothing serious going on and you don't need to worry about it."

"If it's not serious, then why can't Fox know?"

Elijah knew the answer to this question, but he wanted me to say it out loud. He needed justification for keeping quiet about this for me.

"You know Fox," I started. "He overreacts. Just me interacting with Landon is enough to send him into a spiral."

Elijah groaned and put his face in his hands.

"You must hate me," he muttered.

"Surely you can talk Fox down if he does find out," I said. Fox was soft when it came to Elijah. He was practically the only person he would listen to.

"I tried telling him to move on from what happened with Landon the *last* time we saw him here and he wouldn't listen," Elijah reminded me. "It's like he doesn't get that Landon was pretty much in the same position as me but worse. Micah told me about how his dad outed him at church in front of everyone."

That was news to me.

"Oh you didn't know that?" Elijah asked, clearly reading the surprised expression on my face. "I guess his dad had known he was gay for a while and then something happened so his dad, like, stood up in front of the whole church asking for help for his gay son because he 'didn't know what to do' and that's when Dave told him about the conversion therapy he was trying to send me to."

Before I even had the chance to respond, Landon walked over to the table, standing at the edge and looking down at the two of us.

"Oh, hi Landon," Elijah said, suddenly looking less annoyed at the situation.

"Hi," Landon muttered, glancing over at me.

"Elijah and I were just catching up, weren't we?" I said, looking up at Landon, who was looking more uncomfortable as the seconds went by.

I looked at Elijah for him to agree with me, but he just rolled his eyes.

"I'm just going to pretend I didn't see the two of you here," Elijah said after a moment and stood from the table. "But you might want to think about what you're going to do if Fox finds out."

Elijah walked past Landon and made his way back to his friends. Landon stood there for a moment, as if stunned, before taking Elijah's spot across

from me.

"I suppose we should have thought more about going somewhere so... public," I said as he sat down.

He just looked over at me, his expression serious and intense. It was hard for me to read him like this.

"I hate it here," Landon said.

"Well, we could have gone anywhere else for ice cream."

"No, I don't mean *here* specifically. Like *here* as in this town, this area."

That didn't surprise me. There was probably nothing but bad memories here for Landon. Bad memories and a whole lot of people he didn't want to run into.

"I can't fucking do anything here without worrying about who I'll see," Landon added, his hands in fists on the table.

Without thinking, I placed my hands over his, but he quickly pulled his away and shot me a bewildered look.

"At least it was just Elijah," I said, deciding to ignore that moment between us.

"Let's go," Landon said, standing from the table without even waiting for my response.

Livi had gotten her ice cream and the three of us went back out to my car. I made sure to grab plenty of napkins before leaving.

"You know Elijah?" Livi asked me past the spoon of ice cream she had in her mouth.

"He's dating my brother," I replied, handing her a napkin to which she took and put around her cup.

"Oh right," she said. "I've heard about him."

I would have laughed at her response if Landon wasn't looking so gloomy beside me. He sat in the passenger's seat with his arms crossed over his chest and his head leaning against the window. His sister didn't seem to even notice his sullen mood. Or she was just used to it.

"When are you going back to school, Landon?" Livi asked him. That was enough to get him to sit up and pick his head up to look at her.

"Tomorrow," he answered. "I have practice. And a game on Saturday."

"And then you'll be back for winter break?" she asked.

"For some of it," he said. "I'll still have hockey."

Livi let out a sigh before shoving more ice cream into her mouth.

When Livi was finished with her ice cream, we dropped her off at her friend's house. Landon got out of the car to say goodbye to her. The two of them talked for a couple minutes and shared a hug before Landon got back in the car. I waited until Livi was inside before pulling away.

"Now what?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "You can drive me back to the Hanson's."

"If that's what you want."

He still looked so grumpy, and I could tell he didn't really want me to drop him off, so I just drove. I didn't care where we were going. I could just drive around for hours and it wouldn't bother me.

"Why were you so worried about Elijah telling Fox about us?" Landon asked after the two of us sat in silence for a few minutes.

Because I didn't want my brother to hate me more than he already did.

"I would rather not deal with Fox's overreaction," I told him. That was partially the truth, at least as much as I was willing to give. He seemed to accept that answer anyway.

I pulled into a parking space right outside one of the nature trails and parked the car. Without warning, I unbuckled my seatbelt and climbed over the center console to Landon, placing myself on top of him with my legs staddling his.

Landon's eyes widened. "Are you crazy?"

"No one's going to see us out here," I assured him. "And you definitely seem like you need some cheering up. You're awfully grumpy tonight."

Landon's eyes traveled down my torso then back up to my face. I smirked at him, placing my hands on his shoulders and leaning my face down closer to his.

"I'm not grumpy," Landon grumbled, his hands moving to grasp my hips.

"You are," I said, my mouth traveling to the sensitive skin on his neck.

He took in a sharp breath as my lips touched him. I moved my mouth over his skin, hoping to get a reaction out of him. His hands gripped me tighter as I sucked on his skin, bringing one of my hands to the back of his neck to pull him closer to me.

Landon let out a shuddering breath as my teeth met the most sensitive part of his neck. His hands fell from my hips and came up to my face, pulling my mouth onto his.

His hands cupped my face roughly. I grabbed onto one of them and moved it to rest on the side of my neck, holding it there for a moment so he would get the idea. Landon put a little pressure there, causing a sound of pleasure to escape my lips as I opened my mouth wider for him.

Eventually, Landon's mouth moved to my neck, kissing, sucking, and nipping at the skin. I was blissed out, thinking of nothing other than Landon

and his mouth on me.

It wasn't until after I dropped Landon off and got home that I noticed the marks he had left on me. Normally, this would piss me off. When I had been hooking up with James, it was a strict rule not to leave any marks, but with Landon it was different. I didn't mind the bruises if they came from him.

It was just going to be a pain in the ass to hide them from my family.

***

The next day, Mom and Dad drove Fox to Providence early so that he could make it for the morning skate with his team at Brown's rink. The rest of us stayed home for a little while longer until it was closer to game time before we piled into my car and drove to Brown.

Luckily it was cold enough out for me to justify wearing a turtleneck, so the hickeys from Landon went unnoticed.

"Wren, turn the heat on!" Fawn exclaimed loudly from the back seat. She sat in the middle and leaned forward so that her face was in between Robin and me.

"The heat is on," I replied.

"Well, it's not reaching back here!"

"We're going to cook up here if he turns it up," Robin said, turning to face her. "Huddle together and use eachother's body heat for warmth."

Fawn smacked him on the shoulder and leaned back in her seat. She was the only one complaining, but that was typical. Colt was leaning against the window with his face buried in his phone, headphones in and drowning out the rest of us. Raven was reading some romance book with a half naked man on the cover. It seemed that the only thing that passed the time for Fawn was complaining.

"This is sexist," Fawn grumbled, causing Robin to let out a shocked laugh.

"How?"

"It just is!" she said. "Women always have to be cold so men can be comfortable."

"What are you talking about?"

"There is actually a study about how office temperatures are based on male preferences, often leaving women cold and uncomfortable at work," I added, earning a look of confusion from my brother.

"Okay, but this isn't an office building," Robin replied.

"I'm just saying, she's not wrong."

"Alright, alright," Robin relented, turning the heat up. "I will turn it up just for you, little Fawn." Shocker. Robin was not one to deny his siblings anything.

The rest of the ride had a lot less complaining, and by the time we reached the ice rink, it was almost game time.

Our parents were already in the stands, saving a row for the rest of us. When we found them, Dad was sprawled across three seats while Mom had put each of their jackets and her purse in three others.

Dad was decked out in Northeastern gear. He had a zip up sweatshirt, a t-shirt under that, a hat, and even a small flag. Mom's attire was simpler, just a quarter-zip with a Northeastern logo in the corner.

"You guys made it!" Dad exclaimed, standing up. "Good thing too because that was getting really uncomfortable."

Mom kissed each of her children on the head as we filed into the row and took our seats.

"Wren, sweetie, if you want to go sit with some friends that's okay. Don't let us keep you," she said as I sat beside her.

She was just bluffing anyway. Mom wanted us all to be together to watch Fox play like we used to. I didn't even know if Stella and James were in Providence. They could have each gone home for Thanksgiving. I doubted Stella did since she chose a school so far away from home to have an excuse *not* to have to go visit.

"I'll stay here," I said. Mom smiled and tossed an arm around me, squeezing me into a hug.

Sitting next to Robin during this was a big mistake. He was loud an obnoxious, bumping into me whenever he stood up when something he found exciting was happening. I could barely follow along with this, not because it was difficult, but because I found it so boring.

Fox was playing well apparently, and my whole family stood up when he scored a goal. Mom was gripping my arm every time Fox was even on the ice, either out of nerves or excitement.

Robin let out a loud 'boo' when Fox got sent to the penalty box during the last period.

"Bullshit call!" he exclaimed.

"What happened?" I asked, looking down at the ice in confusion.

"Guy got caught up in Fox's stick and they called him for tripping," Robin explained, shaking his head with irritation.

Okay, whatever that meant. I assumed tripping other players wasn't allowed and warranted a penalty, but what did I know.

When Fox got out of the penalty box, he immediately got a breakaway with the puck. My whole family stood in anticipation, and when he scored yet again, a chorus of cheers came from all of them. Even Colt seemed like he was into the game and I didn't think he liked anything other than his phone and his video games.

Fox's team ended up winning, which probably wasn't all that difficult for them. I wasn't sure that Brown had a great hockey team, not that I followed it that closely.

"Oh, that was such a good game!" Mom said happily as we walked out of the stands and toward the exit.

"I'm still mad about that bullshit call on Fox, but at least he scored because of it," Robin said, walking ahead with our mother.

Once we got outside, we just stood around waiting for Fox. Our parents wanted to bring us all out to dinner and had made reservations at a place not too far from the rink.

"Oh, Wren!" Mom called out, grabbing my attention away from my phone. "Isn't that your friend over there?"

Dread was what I felt at that moment. There was only one 'friend' from school that my mother had ever met and it was the last person I needed walking over here when Fox was bound to show up at any moment.

"Landon!" she called out, waving at him.

"Mom, wait," I started, but it was too late. He saw us.

He saw my mother waving at him to come over, and against his better judgement, he did. Most likely to avoid seeming rude to my sweet mother, but part of me wished he just ran away. He said something to the guys he was with, presumably guys from his hockey team, and started walking toward our group.

Robin glanced at me with wide eyes, but didn't say anything. Even Fawn looked over at me with a sort of panicked expression.

"Landon! It's good to see you again," Mom said with a kind smile.

"Yes, you too, Mrs. Ridley," Landon politely replied.

"Sweetie, just call me Vanessa," she said. "We're about to head out to dinner. You should come with us! We never get to see any of Wren's friends."

"Oh, that's alright. I wouldn't want to intrude."

"You wouldn't be intruding! Please, I insist."

"Mom," I started, hoping to move this along before Fox showed up.

But of course, it was too late. Fox stood at the other end of the group, throwing a murderous glare Landon's way.

At that point, I really didn't know what to do. He had seen him. And sure, I could probably find some way to explain this away if our mother wasn't so insistent on Landon coming to dinner with us. If he had just been passing by and being polite, this could have been explained away in few words.

Fox's glare seemed to grow darker, and it was like he knew this had something to do with me because he turned that glare on me.

And our parents, being oblivious to this, greeted Fox with smiles and rounded us up to the cars so we could go to dinner. Mom walked beside Landon, leading him to my car like she was afraid he would escape if she strayed too far.

All I could feel was Fox's fiery glare on the back of my head as we went to the car.

**

THANKS FOR READING!

34

Landon Reilly

If someone asked me how I ended up in Wren's car with three of his siblings in the back seat, including one that wants to murder me, I'd have no fucking clue what to say.

I knew it was a bad idea going to this game, but Coach basically made it mandatory. He wanted us to go watch Northeastern since we were playing them tomorrow because it was a 'unique' opportunity to be able to go watch them in person right before our game with them. Rojas and Shea dragged me there without me having much of a say anyway. I thought I had this figured out, that I'd be able to get in and out of there without being noticed by Wren and his family, but I was clearly mistaken.

And somehow I ended up getting roped into dinner with them. The car ride was filled with a long, awkward silence. I could only imagine how bad the mood would be at dinner.

I should have made up an excuse. I should have walked away. But it was too late.

Part of me didn't care about Fox knowing about us. If he tried to fight with me, I'd just cross that bridge when I got to it. But I knew it mattered to Wren for some reason, so it kind of mattered to me too by default. Even though I knew he wasn't as serious about us as I was.

Wren was tapping on the steering wheel as he drove, a nervous tick I had only seen from him once before. I hated that he was feeling this way because of me and there was no way for me to make it any better.

When Wren parked the car at the restaurant, Fox barely waited for the car to be fully stopped before he got out and stormed off. Wren's other brother in the back seat, who I assumed was Robin, let out a low laugh.

" *This* is going to be an interesting dinner," Robin said, glancing over at his sister.

"I'm so confused about what's going on," she said. This sister was not the one I met before at Wren's house.

"I'm sure you're not the only one, Raven," Robin replied, opening the car door and stepping outside. Raven followed after him, leaving Wren and I alone in the car.

"Wren, I'm sorry," I said once we were alone. It felt strange apologizing to him, like I was begging and pleading for his forgiveness.

"What for?"

"I tried to not be seen by you guys. Coach made the whole hockey team go watch Northeastern since we're playing them tomorrow."

Wren shrugged. "There's nothing we can do about it now."

I followed Wren as he got out of the car and walked toward the restaurant, his family already waiting inside. I didn't know what to expect from this dinner. Part of me thought Fox would cause a scene by the way Wren wanted to keep him in the dark about us. But with the way he was in the car, glaring at us and refusing to speak, I figured it would be more of that. Or hoped it would.

The family was already sitting down when we got inside, leaving two seats on the end of the table for Wren and me. Wren sat down beside Robin while I sat down next to him on the end, across from his mother. Fox was all the way at the other end of the table, which was probably for the best.

"I'm so happy you could join us, Landon," Vanessa said, beaming at me from across the table. "Get anything you want."

I looked down at the menu in front of me, skimming the entrees. Everything was expensive. Even the cheapest option was more than I wanted anyone to spend on me. Maybe this was where Wren got his giving tendencies from.

He was always buying my coffee or my food, despite knowing I didn't want him to do that.

As if being able to sense my discomfort with the whole ordeal, Wren placed a comforting hand on my thigh, squeezing it lightly. His touch didn't completely eradicate my nerves, but it helped a little.

Wren was so confusing to me. He acted like he cared about me, like he really wanted to be with me, but he rejected the idea of coming over to the Hanson's last night, and he didn't want his family to know about us. He was just going along with what his mother wanted. He wasn't going to introduce me as his... whatever I was to him. To his family we were friends, or even just acquaintances. And Wren was probably going to try to keep it that way.

I put my hand on top of Wren's before lightly pushing it off my thigh. Wren took his hand and gripped his menu with it, his jaw clenched, but despite that, he seemed relaxed.

I didn't know what the right thing to do was, if I should let him show me the little affection he was willing to give or act like there was nothing between us.

We ordered our food and there was light conversation for most of dinner. I spent the whole time mainly listening to Vanessa tell stories and catch Robin up on what had been going on at home while he was away from school. It wasn't until we were finished and waiting for the check that conversation was directed toward me.

"So, Landon, you go to school with Wren?" Wren's father, Leo, asked me.

I cleared my throat. "I actually go to Providence College not too far away."

"Oh, that's where Fox is playing tomorrow!" Vanessa exclaimed with a smile.

I plastered a fake smile on my face. "I, uh, I play hockey there."

"Oh, you do?" Vanessa excitedly asked. "That's wonderful!"

I spared a glance down at Fox. He wasn't looking at us, but he was definitely listening in. His jaw was clenched and his hand was gripping his glass so tightly his knuckles were turning white. It was like he was biting his tongue, forcing himself to keep quiet for his mother's sake when what he really wanted to do was cuss me out and beat me up. I couldn't really blame him for that.

Wren's other siblings, Robin and Fawn, clearly knew what was going on and kept casting looks between us, Fox, and each other.

I should have never went along with them. I was ruining their time together as a family all because the invitation was sprung up on me and I didn't know how to get out of it in the moment.

"It's nice to have a little friendly competition," Vanessa added with a smile. From the other end of the table, Fox laughed, and now all eyes were on him.

"Mom, do you even know who he is?" Fox asked her.

"Fox, stop," Wren calmly interjected before his mother could respond.

"You, shut the hell up," Fox snapped, pointing at his brother. "I don't want to hear anything from you right now."

"Boys, enough," Leo cut in, looking confused and sounding resigned like he was used to having to get between his two sons.

"No, seriously, do any of you know who he really is?" Fox asked, looking around the table.

Wren glared at his brother. While before he looked calm and relaxed, Wren now looked tense. It was a strange look on him that I had never really seen before.

That look on his face distracted me from the embarrassment for a moment, but once my mind caught up, I couldn't help but feel humiliated. Fox was going to call me out in front of his family, which wouldn't have been half as

embarrassing if I wasn't so involved with his brother. But the embarrassment hit me with full force, and I felt like getting up and walking out and never seeing anyone from this family again.

When no one answered Fox, he continued.

"He's the one who got us kicked out of the tournament last year," Fox spat. "After he *attacked me* . And he gave Elijah hell even before that."

Everyone was silent for a moment and I was mortified. It wasn't like what he was saying was untrue. The worst part about it was that it was true, and couldn't help but think that this was why Wren was so reluctant to be serious with me. He didn't want to meet the Hansons, but he didn't really want me to be spending any time with his family either. Maybe it was because he knew they would hate me when Fox found out and told them everything. He knew we couldn't last because his family was important to him and I would only drive a wedge between them.

I wanted to shrivel up and vanish into nothing. I wanted to cease to exist at all. There was nowhere I could escape to. I was frozen in place.

Wren hadn't said a word; he barely even reacted. I didn't know what I expected. Him to defend me? From what? Fox was telling the truth.

" *And-* " Fox started again.

"Fox, enough!" Vanessa snapped.

It was the only time all night that she looked even remotely upset. She had been happy throughout the whole dinner, laughing and smiling with her kids. But now, because I was here and causing all this tension, her night was ruined.

"I very well know who he is," she added, raising her eyebrows at Fox. That meant that Dan and Mindy had told her about me after that time I saw them all at their house. That only made me feel even more embarrassed.

Wren must have sensed my discomfort and started to stand, motioning for me to follow him. I wordlessly left the able with Wren. I should have thanked his parents for the meal, thanked his mother for inviting me. But it was like I was on autopilot, my feet taking me wherever Wren went. The two of us left the restaurant and went outside. Wren leaned back against his car with his hands in his pockets while I stood in front of him.

"Well, that wasn't as bad as I thought it would be," Wren said in a light tone.

I wanted to cry. I didn't know what I wanted from him. No part of me wanted to remember anything that had happened tonight, but I still wanted him to comfort me. We were standing only a few feet apart, but it felt like he was a mile away.

"It wasn't that bad?" I asked in disbelief. My words were short and choppy, nearly caught in my throat. I could feel my throat drying up while tears welled in my eyes.

"You're upset." He said it in a bland tone. A statement, not a question. It was like he couldn't understand why the whole thing upset me.

I let out a humorless laugh, a cough coming out at the end.

"Yeah, Wren, I'm fucking upset."

"You don't need to be."

"But I am! That was humiliating!"

"It was far more embarrassing for Fox," Wren said. "He nearly threw a tantrum."

He tried to play it off like that didn't bother him, but there was a reason he didn't want Fox knowing about us, so there was no way this whole thing didn't affect him too.

I could feel him putting a wall up, pulling away from me. And that made me want to cry even more.

The two of us didn't say anything else before his family eventually exited the restaurant.

Fox walked right past us and surprised everyone by getting into the passenger's seat of Wren's car. I was shocked and didn't realize Vanessa had walked over to me until she put her hand on my shoulder.

She looked at me with kind eyes, reminding me so much of Mindy.

"Thank you for coming tonight, Landon," she said. "Maybe we'll see you tomorrow at the game."

"Thank you for dinner," I managed to get out.

Leo walked over and patted me on the shoulder before the two of them went to their own car with Colt and Fawn. With Fox sitting in the front seat of Wren's car, I had to get in the back behind the driver's seat next to Raven who was in the middle seat, Robin on her other side.

"You're dropping me off last," Fox said to Wren as he got into the driver's seat. Wren let out a sigh and started the car.

Robin reached forward and smacked Fox on the back of the head.

"Quit being a dick," Robin said. Fox didn't respond, and the car ride back to my dorm was silent.

When we pulled up to my building, I couldn't get out of the car fast enough.

"I'll text you," Wren said as he rolled down the window, staring at me intensely. I nodded at him before rushing into my building.

It wasn't until I was finally in my room that I let the tears fall.

***

Wren Ridley

"Can someone fill me in?" Raven asked as soon as we pulled away from Landon's building. "What was all that about?"

"Don't ask that right now," Robin muttered.

"You were at the tournament last year," Fox said, turning around to face her.

"I know, but I didn't know you had actual personal beef with him," she replied. "Or that he was friends with Wren. How did that happen?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Fox said, fixing a glare on me.

They were both waiting for me to say something, but I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction.

"Can we all just agree that it's none of our business who Wren hangs out with?" Robin asked, trying to play peacekeeper like always. It wouldn't work this time.

"No, I don't think we can," Fox spat. "Because I think it is my business that my brother is getting close with someone who has tried to attack me more than once and who made my boyfriend's life a living hell!"

Still, I didn't respond. I would only be adding fuel to Fox's fire if I did. His anger fed off of other people. Me becoming defensive would only make things worse. He needed time to cool down and time away from me.

"Please don't kill each other," Robin said as I parked outside the hotel he and Raven were staying at with the rest of our family. Fox was staying at another with his team.

"No promises," Fox muttered, and the twins got out of the car and made their way into the hotel.

I was ready to bring Fox to his and get away from him, but he had other plans.

"Bring me to your dorm," he demanded.

I let out a long sigh. "I think you need to go cool down."

"No, we need to have a private conversation and it's not going to be in the car because I can't say what I need to say in a confined space because I might strangle you."

At least he was taking precautions.

I relented and brought the two of us to my dorm. James wasn't around which was good. Maybe he went home for Thanksgiving after all.

I leaned back against my desk, putting some space between Fox and me. He stayed standing by the door and looked around the room. His eyes caught on something behind me. I followed his line of sight and saw that Landon's hockey sweatshirt was out in the open, hanging on the back of my desk chair. I bit down on my bottom lip and looked back at Fox, who was now scowling at me, his eyes wide and furious.

"What the fuck is going on?" he questioned, his voice low but full of emotion. His hands were in fists by his sides.

"I assume you can suspect."

He shook his head at me and began pacing in front of the door. He wasn't lying when he said he couldn't be in a confined space for this conversation.

"Why?" he asked after a moment. "Why do you like fucking with me? I thought we were over this, that we were gonna start acting like real brothers!"

My heart jolted a little bit at his words. This was what I wanted to avoid; I wanted us to repair our relationship, not dismantle it further. I wanted to be a good big brother for Fox, for all my younger siblings, like Robin was. I wanted them to be able to rely on me, to want me around. Them not wanting me around was one of my biggest fears.

I usually kept my fears hidden so deep down inside me that I forgot they were there, but it was times like these that they were at the forefront of my

mind, mocking me and letting me know that I'd never be able to forget about them.

"You know, I thought we were really becoming close, that we were done hating each other," Fox continued.

"We are."

"No because you must fucking hate me!" Fox exclaimed. "Tell me right now what's going on with you two."

"It's nothing." It was a lie and it tasted like poison coming out of my mouth.

"Don't bullshit me right now, Wren."

He stared at me, willing me to tell him the truth. I didn't know what to say.

"Are you *with* him?" Fox asked when I said nothing, gesturing toward the sweatshirt hanging on my chair.

"It's not- it's not serious," I stuttered. Even that was a lie. It was more serious than I wanted to admit, more serious than I even realized until this moment.

I felt the need to play it off like it was nothing, for my sake and for Landon's. Fox would be playing against him tomorrow, and if he was still angry by then, who knew what damage he could do.

I also felt the need to protect Landon. I wanted Fox's anger to stay directed at me. I didn't want him saying anything bad about Landon, even if he wasn't here to hear it.

"I guess a lot to you isn't serious," Fox said. "Because if you were serious about smoothing things over with me, then you wouldn't be with him in the first place!"

He had a point, but it was possible for me to be serious about both. I wasn't about to argue that with him though.

"Do I have to remind you what he's done?" Fox asked in exasperation. "That he bullied Elijah? That he beat him and had a hand in outing him to his entire team which forced him to come out to his mother and got him kicked out of his house? That he has attacked us both? What do you think he's going to do to you if he gets angry?"

Fox knew nothing about Landon, nothing about how he changed or who he really was. And he didn't care to. He wanted to hold onto this anger, let it fester and explode. It didn't matter that Elijah wanted to forgive and forget; he wanted to be his protector, to be angry on his behalf because Elijah was too kind to hold a grudge.

And Fox didn't trust me. He didn't trust my judgement. I could tell him about how Landon had changed, how I really felt about him and that I had never felt this way about anyone else. But he wouldn't want to hear it and it wouldn't matter anyway.

Fox shook his head at me and ripped open the door.

"Let's go," he snapped. "And don't even bother coming to my game tomorrow. I don't want to see you and I don't want to talk to you."

I would be there anyway, if only to make sure he didn't beat Landon bloody and blue.

**

THANKS FOR READING!!

PLEASE LEAVE YOUR THOUGHTS

35

TRIGGER WARNING: use of homophobic slur

Landon Reilly

My stomach was turning as I stepped foot in the locker room the next day. Playing against Fox hadn't been a huge concern of mine until last night's shit storm. Now I knew he would be targeting me, but I didn't know how I would react. I didn't know if I truly had control over my anger when faced with something like this. But I did know that if things did go badly with Fox today and I retaliated and ended up hurting him, I would have to say goodbye to Wren forever.

It wasn't like Fox had no reason to hold a grudge against me. In fact, he had multiple reasons, all of which were valid. I didn't even think his biggest problem with me was anything I'd done to him, but everything I'd done to Elijah, starting with the way I'd treated him when he came out.

*

"Landon," Micah hissed, grabbing my attention away from my hockey gear.

It was the end of practice and I was exhausted and ready to go home. I would have to sit down with my father for God knows how long to talk to him about everything we worked on, so the last thing I wanted to do was stick around too long after practice. But as the person who would undoubtedly be the captain for senior year, I needed to show leadership and talk to my teammates when they needed me.

It was the end of the season, I was practically the captain already. These practices were essentially just preparation for the next season since we didn't have any games left this year. There was only a couple weeks of school left, and then I would be doing summer hockey camp with most of my team as their captain.

"What's up?" I asked Micah, hiding my annoyance.

Micah motioned for me to follow him toward the back of the locker room near the showers. Everyone had already finished showering and the area was deserted.

"I need to tell you something," Micah started. "I don't know what to do, or what the right *thing to do is."*

I had no idea what made Micah think I would have any idea of what the right thing would be, but I listened anyway. Surely I could ease his mind if he was about to confess to me he was doping or something. Half the guys on the team wouldn't pass a drug test.

"Okay, what's going on?" I asked.

Micah looked around, assuring himself that we were alone, then he moved closer to me, his eyes wide with worry.

"It's about Elijah," Micah whispered. "He... he came out to me. He said he's gay."

A range of emotions raged through me. I clenched my jaw so hard I could've broken a tooth. This was the last thing I expected. I'd have rathered Micah tell me he was on steroids than to hear this tidbit of information about Elijah Ellis.

The same Elijah I had a crush on when we were kids, the one my father knew *I had a crush on years ago. The very same one that was the reason my father knew I was gay, because I couldn't keep my crush locked down and hidden. The reason why my father was so hard on me, why he hated me.*

"And I don't really know what to do," Micah stammered, looking nervous. "I don't know what could happen if this got out. I don't want him to lose his position on the team or anything."

Micah. Stupid, stupid Micah had no idea what he'd just done.

He had no idea what his confession had done do Elijah, what it had done to me. Because there was no way I could let this slide. If my father ever found out I was hiding this secret for Elijah, there was no telling what he would accuse me of or what he would do to me. He would probably assume I was with Elijah. He'd kill me.

My hands were in fists by my side. Before Micah could say anything else, I turned and threw my fist at the wall, my knuckles splitting and Micah letting out a loud gasp.

I let out an angry, strangled groan before turning to Micah again.

"There's nothing we can do for him, Micah," I said through gritted teeth and stormed away.

I was so angry it was like I was walking with flames in my wake. The team parted for me as I made my way to Elijah. He looked at me with those kind eyes filled with confusion.

Then, he looked behind me and his face filled with horror. Micah chased after me, trying to stop what I was about to do next. Elijah could put two and two together. He knew what Micah had told me.

I grabbed Elijah by the front of the shirt and yanked him toward me before throwing him up against the lockers.

"When were you going to tell us all that you're a faggot?" I hissed. I removed one hand from his shirt and punched him in the stomach. "Huh? Answer me!"

Elijah didn't answer as he hunched over at my blow, gasping a deep breath.

"I think it's fair for everyone in here to know that they play hockey with a fag," I spat. "That they change in front of you, shower with you."

Still, Elijah said nothing. I punched him in the stomach again and he let out a whimper, tears streaming down his face.

"You're disgusting, you should be ashamed," I told him. "After today, when Coach finds out, you'll never step foot in this locker room again."

With that, I shoved him against the lockers one last time before grabbing my stuff and storming out of the room, catching the betrayed look on Micah's face as I left.

I let out a loud curse as I stepped outside, pulling at my hair as I made my way to my car.

Nothing could have prepared me for this.

I threw my things into the car and then got in the driver's seat, pounding on the steering wheel and letting out a strangled yell.

I now had to face my father and convince him I had nothing to do with Elijah Ellis.

*

"You okay, Reilly?" Rojas asked, standing in front of me and pulling me from my thoughts.

I blinked a few times, letting my eyes focus on his face.

Guilt was overwhelming me at that moment. I couldn't forget the way I had treated Elijah. It would haunt me forever, and I knew I deserved whatever Fox threw at me.

I tried my hardest to never think about my past, but there were times like this where memories came rushing back as if they were taunting me and letting me know they would live within my mind forever.

"I don't think I can go out there," I admitted. I felt sick. I would only bring the team down.

"Sure you can," Rojas said, patting me on the shoulder. "Everyone gets nerves from time to time."

I didn't know how to explain to him that this wasn't just nerves; it was something else entirely. It wasn't nerves that made me want to hide from Fox. It was shame, guilt, and dread of what would happen if we did have an altercation.

Rojas didn't have much time to give me a pep talk or convince me everything would be alright. A few moments later, we would be going out on the ice for warm ups, so I let him finish getting ready.

I went to my things and checked my phone. I had three texts from Wren, all of which I left unanswered.

From: Wren

Don't let Fox make you feel bad. He's dramatic.

Seriously Lance, it's not worth getting worked up over.

Good luck tomorrow. I'll be there.

I didn't know what to say to him, so I said nothing. I was embarrassed, and I felt strange about causing tension between Wren and his brother. Wren would only tell me how ridiculous I was if I told him that.

I put my phone in my bag and the headed out to the ice for warm ups with the rest of my team.

Usually skating freely like I did in warm ups could calm me down, but not this time. Not when I knew Fox was on the other side of the ice, probably scowling at me, telling his teammates about everything that I had done.

I couldn't even look to the other side of the ice. I was sick to my stomach.

My teammates skated circles around me all throughout warm ups, so I was relieved when I could finally go sit on the bench. Coach was starting the first line, which I was no longer on because Shea had been back, but I knew it would only be a matter of time until I was put on the ice. I could hope all I wanted that I wasn't put out there at the same time as Fox, but we were

both freshman, probably both second or third liners, both centers. We would be seeing each other.

Too soon for my liking, I was instructed to go out on the ice. The play was blown dead shortly after I stepped on, and now I had to take a face-off in our defensive zone against Fox. I skated up to the face-off dot, Fox already hunched over and ready for it. He didn't even look at me, which I preferred.

The ref dropped the puck, and Fox won it cleanly, shooting it off to one of his teammates. My team sprung into action, but it wasn't enough. A teammate passed the puck back to Fox and he immediately shot it into a wide open net, giving Northeastern a 1-0 lead. As they celebrated, I went to the bench with the rest of my team.

It was hard to even be frustrated at allowing Fox to score because the longer I was out there, the more I realized I shouldn't have been playing. I was a bundle of nerves and there was nothing I could do to make it better. I would just keep making mistake after mistake, ruining the team's chanced for victory and probably ending up getting called out by Coach.

In between periods I couldn't even focus on what the coaches and Rojas were saying. All I could do was wait for the other shoe to drop with Fox.

The whole game so far, Fox had been tame. The two of us had barely even interacted on the ice, but he wasn't targeting me, and neither was anyone else on his team. All that did was stress me out even more because now I was waiting for it. Maybe this was what he wanted to do. Maybe he was trying to make me think nothing was going to happen so that he could get to me when I wasn't expecting it. Or maybe he was just trying to fuck with me mentally and make me think for the whole game that he was going to come after me.

And that was working. I hated the anticipation of it, the dread. I didn't want to fight Fox, didn't trust myself to fight at all anymore. It felt like it would erase all the progress I'd made since going back to therapy.

It was the third period now, and I was zoning out on the bench. Rojas sat down beside me and nudged me in the shoulder.

"Are you okay, Reilly?" he asked. This was the first time he spoke directly to me during the game. I wished before he would have taken me seriously when I told him I couldn't go out there. I needed to sit out and get out of my own head.

I didn't have time to answer Rojas because at that moment, Coach was ordering me out onto the ice. That was when things started to really go downhill.

I had been shaky the whole game, anybody could have seen that, but it had gotten worse somehow, and now I was feeling nauseous. I could barely follow the play, and when one of my line mates passed me the puck, I just froze.

I saw Fox coming for me, but I still didn't move.

To his credit, he did try to slow down. No one expects the player with the puck to just *stop* , but I couldn't move. And seeing him coming for me made it even harder to move. I heard some shouting just before Fox finally collided with me, knocking me down, my head bashing against the ice.

The play continued. The play wouldn't stop just because someone got knocked down, but it did eventually stop when I didn't get up.

I hated myself in that moment. I was humiliated and tired and sick of being around all these people. I spent this whole game worried about what was going to happen with Fox just to freeze up and let him hit me. Maybe I wanted him to hit me. Maybe I wanted him to do more like fight with me, punch me until he knocked me unconscious. Because then I would feel like I at least got some payback from him for everything I'd done. Maybe then he would hate me a little less and not make things so difficult for Wren and me.

So I froze, hoping what? Hoping that he would bash my head in? Hoping that Fox would get his revenge on me and it would suddenly make everything better, take away all my guilt, anger, and shame?

One of my teammates stood over me, looking at my face as if trying to figure out if I was concussed. Then the team doctor was out on the ice and I was even more embarrassed.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," I said, sitting up. I stood up on my own, not allowing my teammates or the doctor help me stand. I locked eyes with Fox for a moment to see he was glaring at me and then I skated off the ice and went back to the locker room.

The team doctor looked me over and made me go though concussion protocol, but left me alone after determining I wasn't concussed, just an idiot.

I was furious with myself, and with the situation. I pulled my jersey off and threw it at the locker, then threw off the rest of my pads and threw them down too. It took everything in me not to punch something. I took deep breaths, calming myself down as best as I could

The game could have gone so much worse. I could have fought with Fox and made Wren hate me forever, or I could have just let Fox beat me up. What happened was truly one of the better scenarios, but I was so fucking angry and embarrassed that I couldn't even be relieved that that was all it was.

The rest of the team came into the locker room a few minutes later, each of them giving me stares. We had ended up losing by one goal, but I couldn't find it in me to really care. I sat there and listened to what the coaches had to say, and as soon as we were dismissed, I was gone, opting to shower back at the dorms.

What I didn't expect was for Fox to be waiting for me by the exit with an angry look on his face. He caught me off guard and grabbed the front of my shirt, pushing me up against the wall.

All I could think was: this is it. This was what Fox wanted. He didn't want to fight me on the ice with an audience. He wanted to fight me while we were alone where there would be no consequences like there would be during the game.

"Listen to me," he seethed. His voice was low but ferocious, like he didn't want anyone else to hear but he wanted me to know how angry he was. "I don't know what kind of game you're playing with Wren, but if you hurt him, I'm going to make you wish you never even looked at him."

Fox still gripped the front of my shirt. I wanted to shove him off, let a little bit of my anger out, but I stayed put.

This showed how little Fox knew about our relationship because I was convinced I was the one that was going to end up hurt.

"I'm not-" I started, but he quickly cut me off.

" *Listen* ," Fox hissed. "Because I want to make this very clear. If you lay a hand on him, I'm going to come here and beat you so bad that you're going to forget your own name."

That was what he meant. He didn't think I would hurt Wren emotionally, but physically. He didn't want me hitting his brother. It made me feel awful when I realized I already had hit his brother before we were really together.

I felt sick all over again. Here was Fox, warning me against hitting his brother because he didn't want me hurting him, and it was something I had already done. I had bruised Wren all because he made me angry and I couldn't handle it like a normal person. Maybe I wasn't right for Wren, he deserved better.

I could try all I wanted to convince Fox that I was a changed person, that I was truly sorry for what I had done to him and Elijah and that I would never treat Wren that badly, but it would be a lie and he wouldn't fall for it.

"What's this all about?" Wren asked, seemingly appearing out of nowhere. He had a troubled look on his face, a glare fixed on his brother. He stood there wearing my hockey sweatshirt, his hands in the front pocket.

Fox let me go and walked over to his brother, looking at my sweatshirt on him with disgust.

"Fuck you," Fox spat, bumping Wren's shoulder as he left.

I couldn't face Wren. I needed to go back to the dorm and be alone like I had planned on since the beginning of the year. I wanted to mind my business, keep my head down.

I started to walk away, but Wren easily caught up to me.

"I wanted to make sure you're okay," he said, matching my brisk pace.

"I'm fine."

"Okay, if you say so," he replied. "Do you want to go-"

"Wren, I want to be left alone," I snapped, stopping in my tracks and turning to face him.

He, of course, didn't seem to let my outburst bother him. He kept his face neutral, his hands in his pockets.

"Well, alright then," Wren said. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Probably not.

Wren pressed his lips together. "Okay."

Without saying anything else, I turned and walked away.

**

Thanks for reading leave your thoughts

36

Wren Ridley

My fingers tapped on the steering wheel as I drove Robin back to the airport later that night. It was like I couldn't get them to stop even if I tried. I didn't have a handle on my mind, and they had a mind of their own.

Robin and I were silent for a little while. I had a book playing, trying to lose my mind in anything other than my reality at the moment. But Robin was a talker, so it didn't last long.

"This was a really fun few days. I'm kinda sad it's over," Robin said, glancing over at me.

I was glad it was enjoyable for one of us. For me it was anything but. It was like these short few days had completely derailed my life. My relationship with Fox, my relationship with Landon, both were completely turned around. For the first time in a long time, my life felt completely out of my control. That was why I tended not to let others have a stake in my life. It made things too unpredictable.

"So is everything okay with you and Fox?" Robin asked after I didn't reply.

I scoffed. "What do you think?"

Robin shot me an awkward smile like that was the exact answer he expected.

"He'll come around," he said.

"I don't think he will."

I knew if it ever came to this, Fox finding out, that it would end poorly. He was never going to be okay with me being with Landon. I never expected

him to find out, or for my relationship with Landon to last long enough for Fox to find out.

"He was bitching at me about you last night," Robin said. "I told you it was bold to wear Landon's sweatshirt to the game."

I rolled my eyes. "It's not like I expected to see him after the game. He shouldn't have been in the locker room." He was the one that told me not to even go, so why would I plan on seeing him afterward?

"Look, I know you two like to be at each other's throats, but I think maybe if Fox realized what Landon meant to you he'd be more understanding."

I shook my head and let out a sigh. Robin clearly misunderstood my relationship with Fox entirely. We didn't like being on each other's nerves; it was just how we were. Fox didn't care if Landon meant something to me. He saw my relationship with him as an act of betrayal. It didn't matter how I felt.

" *You* don't know what Landon means to me," I told him.

Robin shot me a knowing look. He was always so perceptive, one of the only people who could catch me in my lies.

"I wasn't born yesterday," he said. "You don't have to tell me anything, but I know this wouldn't be as big of a deal if you two were just friends."

I didn't say anything. Robin could believe what he wanted to believe.

The two of us didn't say anything else until I pulled into the airport and pulled off to the side to let Robin out.

"Well, I'll see you in a few weeks," Robin said, pulling his bag from the backseat. "Try to make up with Fox by Christmas, at least for Mom's sake. She hates when you two are fighting."

"Fly into Boston next time and take the train home," I said, no emotion in my tone. I was done talking about Fox with him. I was done talking at all. The sooner he got out of my car so I could be by myself, the better.

Robin let out a sigh but smiled at me anyway.

"Bye, Wren. Love you."

I gave him a two finger wave and waited until he was in the building before pulling away.

I turned my book back on, rewinding back to the last part I remembered, but after a moment I had to stop it. This was the book I was listening to with Landon and it felt weird to continue it without him, even if he didn't really care about it. I paused the book and put another on.

It was like there were two different parts of my mind; one that was taking over and directing me wherever I was going and one that was just along for the ride. I didn't know where I was headed. I just drove around aimlessly for a while because there was nothing else for me to do. I didn't know where Landon was or if he even wanted to see me.

Eventually I made it back to my dorm and sat at my desk with my laptop. Maybe if I read a little bit of my draft, I could pull out of the writer's block I'd been facing lately.

It seemed like the more I read, the worse I felt. I started to hate my writing, hate the story I created. It felt too much like I was writing about my own life. The main character felt too much like me, and I started hating traits about him that I found present in myself.

I was sitting at my desk for a while, staring at my computer in irritation. I was so lost in thought that I didn't even realize James had come into the room until he slammed his hand down on my desk.

" *Hello* ," he said in an annoyed tone. "Were you just going to ignore me?"

"What?" I glanced at the time. It was just after five. James must have just gotten back from New York.

"I asked how your Thanksgiving was," he replied. "And your time with your family this weekend? Did you really not even hear me?"

I sighed and shut my laptop, standing from my desk.

"No, I didn't hear you, clearly," I said. I walked over to my closet and pulled Landon's sweatshirt out, throwing it on over my t-shirt. "My Thanksgiving was fine. How was yours?" Not that I really cared all that much, but I was so out of it I just had to go through the motions.

"It was good, glad to be back though," James said. He looked at me strangely when he saw me walking toward the door. "Where are you going? You don't wanna go get dinner?"

"No, I gotta go," I said, patting my pockets to make sure I had my keys and wallet with me before I left.

I sent a text to Landon on my way down to the car.

To: Landon

Are you around?

I didn't expect a response, but I hoped for one anyway. Landon hadn't been answering any of the texts I sent him. I didn't even care about appearing desperate, I just wanted him to respond.

He wanted space after the game, I got that, but it sort of felt like he wanted nothing to do with me anymore and that made me feel empty. If he didn't want to see me at all anymore, I wished he'd just say it. That way I wouldn't have to appear so desperate for his attention.

A response never came as I drove over to his dorm. I didn't even know if he was here.

When I knocked on the door, Kyle answered with a look of confusion.

"Landon's not here," he said.

"Do you happen to know where he is?" I asked, shoving my hands in my pockets.

"No, shouldn't you?"

"Well, clearly I don't," I said with a grin, trying to hide the strain in my voice. I didn't want it to seem like I snapped at him, but it may have come across like that anyway.

"I haven't seen him since I got back," Kyle said. "I figured he was with you."

Not very helpful, Kyle!

"Alright then," I replied, turning and walking out.

When I got back to my car, I just sat there for a few moments. I didn't like this feeling of uncertainty. I wasn't sure what was going on with Landon and me anymore, or if he was angry with me or embarrassed. It made me feel insecure and unimportant.

I wished he would talk to me. I wished I knew what to do to make him want to talk to me.

I wanted the two of us to be able to stay in our own little bubble in Providence, not mixing our lives here with ours away from here. Mixing the two just made things more complicated. It made it so I couldn't keep my life at school separate from my family which also complicated things.

Fox clearly knew that what I had with Landon wasn't platonic, but what did the rest of my family think? Robin had a hunch, maybe my parents did too. I had spent so long hiding my true self from all of them just for them to find out like this. I didn't know what any of them were thinking, didn't know if I even wanted to.

I hated this feeling more than anything. This was why I never let myself get close to anyone. This was why letting my feelings reach deep within me for someone else wasn't a good idea. It was never a good idea, I knew it, yet I let it happen anyway.

I let out a sigh as I looked at my phone once more before leaning my head on the steering wheel. Then I sat up and started the car.

All I could do was drive around, listening to an audiobook, to clear my mind.

***

When classes started backup, that wasn't even enough to distract me from what happened over Thanksgiving break. Landon still wouldn't respond to me, so I stopped trying. I tried to stay away from Stella and James as much as I could. It was only a matter of time before they started questioning me about what was going on and I didn't want to talk to them about it.

The two of them were obviously sick of me avoiding them because they had turned up at the coffee shop one morning, which was normal for Stella but unusual for James considering Anthony worked here.

Stella and James immediately found where I was sitting and wordlessly sat down across from me. I kept my eyes on my laptop and sipped my latte like they weren't even there. That worked for all of five minutes until Stella was waving her hands in my face and forcing me to look at her.

"Is there a reason you two are here distracting me?" I asked, lowering the screen of my laptop slightly so I could look at them.

"Is there a reason you're being mopey and avoiding us?" Stella asked, her tone matching mine mockingly.

"I'm not," I lied.

"Don't bullshit us," James said. "You're clearly going through something. You're never even at the dorm long enough for me to talk to you. I haven't seen you for more than five seconds in days. What's going on?"

I couldn't stand their interrogating or the concerned looks on their faces. They didn't need to know what was going on with me. They wouldn't even begin to understand it.

"I'm just cramming for finals, which are coming up by the way in case the two of you have forgotten," I replied.

The two of them didn't believe a word out of my mouth.

"Anthony! A refill please," I called out, causing James's frown to deepen, but he didn't leave the table like I hoped he would.

Anthony walked over with a strange look on his face, my drink in hand. He set it down and took the cash from my hand without a word before going back to the counter.

"It's going to take more than that to get me to leave," James said once Anthony was out of ear-shot.

"I wasn't trying to get you to leave," I lied, sipping on my new latte. "I just needed a new drink. Need all the caffeine I can get to stay away studying for these finals."

"Oh, shut up Wren," Stella said, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm just going to say it. Did something happen with Landon?"

I kept my expression blank and set my drink back down on the table.

"Why would you ask that?"

"Because he and Jess have been hanging out a lot the last few days. He's usually hanging out with you," she said.

"We don't have to be together all the time."

Stella pressed her lips together tightly, sparing a glance at James and then back at me. I was done with this conversation, and if they wouldn't leave, I would.

"This was great and all, but I really must get going," I said, standing from the table and grabbing my things.

Neither of them followed me out of the coffee shop. I shared a brief glance with Anthony before walking out and heading back to my dorm. Once I got there, I didn't bother going inside. James would be back soon anyway and I didn't want to see him, so I got in my car and drove around. It seemed like that was all I did this week.

Reading and driving always gave me an escape, but with my emotions at an all time high, this was proving difficult. I couldn't even go sit by the beach. It would only remind me of the times I took Landon there to give him some peace of mind. It wouldn't work for me.

I hated that I felt like this, that I felt so lost and and empty and tired. I had never experienced something like this, this loss of something I couldn't even name. I didn't know I could feel this type of hurt. I was so used to bottling up my emotions and keeping them hidden from even myself, but these ones were so enormous that I couldn't keep them locked away. They spilled over, drowning me in them.

I was driving for a while before I made the decision to go to where I knew I'd be able to find Landon. It was almost six, and I knew his hockey practice would be ending soon.

It was Thursday night. I hadn't seen Landon since he walked away from me this weekend, and hadn't heard from him either. I had checked his game schedule and knew that he would be in Boston this weekend to play against Boston University. I had to see him before he was gone.

Without letting myself think more about it, I drove toward the practice rink. I parked the car where I had a view of the doors and waited. It was only a few minutes later when players started trickling out of the doors.

As soon as I saw Landon walk out, I got out of the car. He was by himself, bag slung over his shoulder and hands in the pockets of his sweatpants. I didn't know what I was going to say to him. I hadn't thought it through. I just knew I had to say something.

"Hey," I called out, causing Landon to look up.

He looked at me with a disgruntled expression. His hair was wet and slightly disheveled. It was too cold out for him to be walking around with wet hair.

"What are you doing here?" he muttered. His voice was low like he was trying to avoid anyone noticing him, even me.

"Were you going to tell me you dumped me or was I just supposed to figure it out?" I asked. I didn't know why I said it like that, but it was a thought that kept crossing my mind throughout the days Landon ignored me, that he had broken up with me without ever saying it.

He let out a sigh. "I didn't dump you, Wren."

"Then *why* have you been ghosting me?" I asked urgently. "I tried to give you space, I thought that was what you wanted, but five days without contact seems unnecessarily prolonged don't you think?"

"I didn't dump you, but that doesn't mean we should be together."

There was a pang in my chest at that.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not good for you."

My heart stuttered.

"Why would you say that?" I asked, my voice hollow. I didn't even sound like myself.

"Do we really have to do this?" He started walking away, but I stood in front of him and stopped him in his tracks.

"I want to know what you mean," I said. I didn't dare reach out to touch him, no matter how much I wanted to, how much I craved it. I didn't want him to leave.

"I mean I'm not good for you, Wren. Or for anybody," he said, running a hand through his hair and pulling at the ends. "Do you even know who I am? What I've done? As much as I try to change, I'm still that person!"

I shook my head, holding my hand up to stop him.

"You're not," I said. He didn't see the person he had become in even the short time I had known him. He used to be so angry and quick with his fists. Now he was gentle and sensitive.

"Wren, you don't *know* that. You may think you know everything, but you don't," he replied, looking frustrated, his eyes wide. "I can't be with you. I can't get between you and your family. I need to be alone like I was supposed to be until you came into my life and ruined that for me."

Ruined. I ruined him.

The last time I had heard him say that hadn't hurt like this. My heart fell into my stomach, and I was at a loss for words, my mouth dry, my throat closing.

I was losing him, and there was nothing I could say or do. His mind was made up. It was probably made up days ago while I was still holding onto the hope that he just needed some space.

"I just..." he trailed, letting out a sigh. "I just need to be alone."

That was it.

I watched him walk away from me again.

**

Thanks for reading! Leave your thoughts

37

Wren Ridley

I stared at myself in the mirror, unable to recognize myself for a solid minute. It was like I was a separate person looking in on this pathetic boy in a private moment having a crisis.

I really didn't know who this person was staring back at me, this person who allowed another person to affect him so enormously.

What was I doing, mourning the loss of something that should have never mattered much in the first place? What was I doing, throwing myself into a pit of loneliness and sadness over someone who I was never supposed to care about?

My mind was in shambles, telling me conflicting things. Landon leaving me was a good thing, but also the worst thing. I was stronger than this, but I was also weaker than I'd ever been.

I hated not knowing what to do, losing control of my thoughts. It was something that rarely ever happened to me, and it was something I tried my hardest to avoid.

Landon walking away from me replayed in my mind over and over again. I couldn't stop it. It was like there was a film reel on my brain and that was the only footage.

I should have been prepared for one of us to leave. The little bubble we had was bound to blow up eventually. I thought I was prepared for this, but despite that, it still left me in anguish.

I took a few deep breaths and turned away from the mirror and went back to my dorm room.

James was out. I had been avoiding him. I couldn't take his questioning or even his talking in general. He talked too much. But I knew it was only a matter of time until he showed up, and I needed to figure something out before he got here.

I shut the door behind me and went over to James's unmade bed. I crouched down, reaching underneath it and feeling around until I found what I wanted. If I was in my right state of mind, I never would have done this. There was no telling what was under that bed, but at that moment I couldn't find it in me to care.

I pull a bottle out from under James's bed. It was vodka, which was fine, I didn't really have a preference at this point since all I wanted was to get my mind to do something else other than linger on Landon.

It was a stupid idea, and it was exactly what I judged everyone else for. Turning to alcohol to deal with emotions always felt cowardly to me. But now that I was feeling emotions that I had no idea what to do with, I understood why people did it.

I took a swig of the vodka and winced as I swallowed it, the burn lingering in my throat. I didn't even have time to take another sip before James barged in and ripped the bottle out of my hand.

"What are you doing with that?" he asked with a look of bewilderment. I'd never seen such a strange look on his face. His eyes were bulging out at me like I had two heads.

"Oh, nothing," I answered casually, standing up from the floor and handing James the cap to the bottle.

"Seriously!"

"Having a drink. What else would I be doing with it?"

I walked past him to my side of the room. It wasn't as tidy as I usually kept it, my bed unmade, my desk littered with open notebooks and pens.

"You don't drink, Wren," James said, turning to face me as I went to my bed.

"On occasion," I said with a shrug.

James shook his head. "No, you don't."

It was kind of funny seeing James so worked up. It momentarily made me forget all the sorrow I had been feeling.

Part of me was relieved he had taken the bottle away. I'd still have to sit here with my thoughts, but at least I wasn't going to get myself drunk and regret it later.

I pulled the covers back on my bed and got in, James still looking at me like I was crazy.

"You are acting insane," James said, setting the bottle down on his desk.

"It's just a little drink, James."

"No, it's not just that," he replied. "You're not acting like yourself."

It was strange to see James so serious. He was always joking, teasing, and flirting. The serious look on his face aged him a bit.

"I'm acting exactly like myself," I said, to which James let out a frustrated shriek. He picked the bottle back up and took a sip out of it.

I didn't want to keep talking to him, or have him talk to me, so I laid down and faced away from him, staring at the blank wall.

"It's like five-thirty," I heard James say behind me.

"I'm tired," I replied quietly, my thoughts reaching me again and choking me up. I couldn't talk to James anymore, he'd be able to hear it in my voice.

I heard James sigh and shuffle around the room. I was hoping he'd leave, but he stayed for a while and I kept my back to him the whole time. I

wished sleep would overtake me, but I stayed staring at the wall, letting the memory of Landon walking away consume me.

James called out to me after an hour, maybe. I wasn't sure how much time had passed.

"I'm going to Stella's, you wanna come?" he asked.

I stayed silent. He would just think I was sleeping. I really couldn't talk to him anymore.

James waited a few moments before letting out a sigh and leaving the room.

I didn't bother getting up even with James out of the room. There was nothing for me to do. I had gone ahead on all of my schoolwork, and I was suffering from major writer's block. Even reading offered me nothing in the state I was in.

After a while, I checked my phone and saw texts from Fox.

From: Fox
Why is there a Stella and a James messaging me on instagram telling me there's something wrong with you?

Saying stuff about you acting weird and depressed?

Answer me dipshit

As I was reading the texts, a phone call from Fox popped up on the screen, to which I promptly ignored only to get another angry text from him.

From: Fox
If you don't answer me right now I'm calling mom and she'll go down there.

I know you don't want that so answer the fucking phone.

When Fox called again, I picked it up.

"Yes, brother dear?" I answered.

"What the hell is going on?" was Fox's angry response.

The two of us hadn't spoken since we'd seen each other last. I knew Fox would only reach out when he wanted to talk to me, I just had to wait it out and see if he ever did.

"What do you mean?" I asked, though I could guess what Stella and James had said to him.

"Why are your friends messaging me and telling me you're having a mental breakdown?"

"Hm," I hummed, pausing for a moment. "Not sure. They do tend to be a little melodramatic."

"And they'd go as far as to contact me, who they don't even know, just to be dramatic?" Fox asked.

"Precisely."

"That doesn't seem right to me."

"Well, you know, strange people do strange things."

" *You're* strange," Fox replied. "And you do sound weird. Have you been drinking? Crying? What's happening?"

"No, Fox, I'm as normal as I've ever been." I knew he'd be able to hear something in my voice, the way it was small, raspy, like my throat was closing up.

"So not very?"

I let out a laugh, though it wasn't genuine. I didn't feel like myself. I wasn't sure I even could laugh.

"Wren, seriously," Fox said, sounding agitated. "I'm going to call Mom if you don't give me a reason to think you're good."

"Well, I've already told you that I'm fine," I said. "It's not like you normally call to check up on me. You don't know how I normally am."

"No, but it's not like your friends message me normally to tell me you're not being normal."

"And you care because?" I asked.

"Because you're my brother?" he replied in a mocking, questioning tone. "I know I was pissed at you last time I saw you, but that doesn't mean I don't care. Even if I'm still pissed at you."

"How kind of you."

"I'm calling Mom."

"Fox, don't trouble her with this," I told him. "I'm going home this weekend anyway."

"Are you actually?" he asked, clearly not believing me.

I hadn't thought about it until just then, but I could go home for the weekend to get away from here.

"Yes, I am."

He was silent for a moment, but I could tell that he was on his way to leaving me alone about the whole thing. As long as I was going home, someone else would deal with me and he wouldn't have to worry about it.

"Fine," Fox said finally with a sigh. "Go home this weekend, see Mom and Dad. I'm sure they'll be happy to see you."

"Yes, Fox, I did say that was my plan," I replied.

He sighed. "Okay."

"I will see you in just a few short weeks."

Fox didn't say anything to that. I bet he was rolling his eyes at me.

"Alright, bye," he said.

"Goodbye."

My conversation with Fox had tired me out, but I was still so restless.

The more I thought about going home for the weekend, the worse the idea felt. Mom would instantly know something was wrong and I didn't want to worry her over something like this. I thought more on it and sent a text to my sister.

To: Raven
Would you be able to lend me a place to sleep this weekend?

From: Raven
???
i could
but why?

To: Raven
I would like to get away from school for the weekend, but would rather not go home.

From: Raven
ok sure

The thing with Raven was that I knew she wouldn't ask many questions, not now anyway. It could be a different story once I actually saw her, but she was my best, and only, option at that point.

On Friday afternoon, I packed my things for the weekend and headed out before James even got back from class. Or wherever he was. I tended not to keep tabs on him.

Raven lived relatively close to our parents. Her apartment was only across town, but the independence of living on her own kept her from seeing them for weeks at a time. I knew it pained our mother, but Raven was always fiercely independent.

I drove to the apartment in silence. I knew I wouldn't be able to focus on a book at the moment, and the radio bored me.

By the time I got to the apartment, it was just after four. Raven had a class until four forty-five, so I waited in my car until she got home.

She got home at about five, parking right next to me. She had a look on her face as she glanced at me through the car windows, and I knew that meant she and I were going to have a talk. I'd rather it be with her than with anyone else.

"You missed me so much even though you just saw me last weekend, that's it right?" she asked when we both got out of our cars.

We each grabbed our bags and met behind my car.

"Of course it is," I told her. "You are my favorite sibling after all."

Raven snorted and lightly shoved me. "Bullshit."

I followed Raven up to her apartment on the second floor. She let us into the apartment, telling me that the others weren't home yet. One of the roommates was apparently going to be out for the weekend at her boyfriend's.

Raven's apartment was a decent size. The door opened up into the small kitchen and dining area. The living room was in the center of the apartment with the bathroom behind it surrounded by the three bedrooms. Raven and the other girl each got their own rooms. The other two girls were dating so they shared, according to Raven's explanation as we settled in.

"You can sleep out here on the futon," Raven said, showing me the living room. "It's comfy"

They had a futon off to the side of the room and a small couch in front of the TV.

"Do you wanna order out for dinner?" she asked, sitting down on the couch and pulling out her phone. "I think we could both use some comfort food."

"Doesn't matter to me," I told her, setting my bag down beside the futon then sitting next to her on the couch.

"I think we should get those juicy, delicious, greasy burgers from that pizza place down the street from Mom and Dad's," she said. "I'm really craving one of those. And the fries."

"Sure. Whatever you want."

I wasn't really expecting Raven to want to hang out with me while I was here, figuring she had her own friends and plans for a Friday night. I knew she was just trying to get me comfortable so she could start questioning me. It made me rethink if this was a good idea or not, staying at her place for the weekend.

Raven ordered the food and scrolled through the many streaming services she and her roommates had (they didn't have cable). We made small talk and when the food arrived, she went out to get it.

It wasn't until we were both settled into the couch, a few bites into our meals, that she started questioning me.

"So what's going on?" she asked before taking a bite of an oversized french fry.

"Not a lot. Getting ready for finals," I replied. She shot me an irritated look, knowing I was only pretending to misunderstand her question.

"You know what I mean," she said, staring intently at me. "You've literally never asked to come stay with me, so you don't want to be at school, and you don't want to be at home. What gives?"

"Need a change of scenery. Cramming for finals really takes a lot out of me," I said. "And I figured we could spend some time together."

Raven clearly didn't believe a word coming out of my mouth. She was always so suspicious of everything. She stared at me with narrowed eyes for a moment before taking a bite out of her burger.

"Robin told me you and Fox got into it last weekend," Raven started. "I knew Fox was pissed at you so I knew something probably happened afterwards. I know you don't like fighting with him anymore."

I shrugged. "It's no big deal."

She narrowed her eyes again.

"You guys are fighting about Landon?" she asked, raising her eyebrows at me. She already knew the answer the that, she just wanted me to admit it.

Hearing his name from her locked up my jaw. I couldn't speak, couldn't eat. I wasn't prepared to talk to her about this. I wanted to forget about him this weekend, to forget about everything and hope that I could clear my mind enough to function when I went back to school on Monday.

"Wren," Raven called out, waving her hand in front of my face. "Wren!"

"Hm?"

"You literally just spaced out for like a full minute," she said. She had her food off to the side and she turned on the couch to fully face me. "Look, I know you love me but that's not why you're here, so let's talk, okay?"

"I..."

"I'll be honest with you," Raven started after I trailed off. "Fox texted me earlier, after you asked me to stay over, and told me you were coming home for the weekend and he wanted me to check on you. Something about your friends messaging him all worried about you?"

My breathing started getting heavier, my eyes stinging. I just wanted to forget all this and go back to normal. All I needed was to go back to normal and everything was getting in my way.

I put the heels of my hands into my eyes and let out a pained sound. I couldn't handle the sudden influx of emotions, the sadness, the frustration.

Raven moved closer to me, putting a comforting hand on my shoulder.

"Wren, breathe," she said.

I was breathing. I was breathing really hard, basically hyperventilating. This had never happened to me before. I had never been this overwhelmed with emotions.

"Calm down," she said, running a soothing hand over my back. "It's okay."

"I don't know what that was," I said in a tired voice after my breathing slowed.

"You keep things bottled up," Raven said. "So when things finally bubble over, they come out like that."

I nodded, taking in a deep breath.

"The thing with Landon," she started again after a moment. "Him coming to dinner, Fox being pissed, you wearing his sweatshirt to the game. You two are more than friends, aren't you?"

I laughed. It was a dull sound with no humor. "Not anymore."

It was no surprise to me that she had figured that out. My whole family probably had it figured out by now. I just let myself continue to live in the delusion that my sexuality and my relationship with Landon were still secrets.

"Why?" she asked.

"He dumped me."

"Because of Fox?"

"That's part of it, I'm sure," I said with a sigh. "He has this thing where he thinks he's not good enough for me." And there was the fact that thought I ruined him.

"And have you done anything to show him that he is good enough for you?" Rave asked, an expectant look on her face.

I glanced over at her and she shook her head.

"You need to be open with people if you expect them to want to be with you," she said. "If he's dumping you because of Fox that's one thing, but if he thinks he's not good enough for you it's because you haven't done enough to convince him otherwise."

"We were never meant to last," I told her. "I'll get over it."

"Do you want to be with him?"

I sighed. "Raven-"

"No, seriously, do you want to be with him?" she repeated.

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does," she said, a serious expression on her face.

"Ideally, we would still be together."

"Then you have to fight for him, Wren," Raven replied. "Fox will come around once he realizes this is what you want, what's going to make you happy."

"I can't make him want me back, Raven," I said, my voice catching a bit.

"No, you can't," she said with a sad smile. "But if he broke up with you because he doesn't feel good enough, I would say he probably still wants you. He just doesn't feel deserving of you. You have to tell him that he is."

"He won't hear it," I told her.

She made it sound so simple. It was only because she didn't know the whole story, didn't know him. She didn't know the self-hatred he possessed and how deep it went. She didn't know that I ruined him.

Raven always had a way of getting things out of me like almost no one else could. She was a lot like her twin in that way.

She looked at me sadly then turned to grab her food.

"Let's eat all this greasy food and watch sappy movies," she said, dropping the conversation. At least for now.

That I could get behind.

**

Thanks for reading please leave your thoughts<3

38

Landon Reilly

The team took a bus to Boston on Saturday morning so we could get a morning skate in before the game. I wasn't even sure if Coach was going to play me later after I fucked up so bad last weekend, though I was doing fine at practice. Hockey could work as a distraction, at least sometimes. There were times my thoughts burdened me so badly that nothing could distract me.

Rojas was sitting next me on the bus. We were almost to the rink when he tapped me on the shoulder, causing me to take my earbuds out.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"You good to play later?" he asked, looking at me like he was trying to see if there was anything wrong with me.

"Yeah, why?"

"Last weekend you told me you weren't and I ignored you and you almost got hurt," he said, looking guilty.

I shrugged. "I'm fine."

Physically, I was. Emotionally and mentally, I wasn't.

Therapy this week kept me from completely spiraling, but my heart and head still ached over Wren. Seeing him the other day made it worse.

"I should've known better," Rojas continued. "I mean, you didn't look good, you said you weren't good. I should've listened."

"It's fine," I told him. It wasn't his fault I couldn't deal with my own shit.

Rojas still looked guilty. I didn't know what he wanted from me, whether he wanted me to be angry or to assuage his guilt. I could do neither.

"So I promise to listen if you ever say something like that again," he said.

"It's all good," I replied, turning away to look out the window.

I didn't want to talk to him, or anyone for that matter. The only person I could stand to be around lately was Jess, and it wasn't like I could pack her up in my things and take her to Boston with me, even if she offered.

I felt oddly guilty about the way I left things with Wren, even if it hurt me more than it was going to hurt him. The look on his face when I told him we were over was one I'd never seen on him before. He looked so lost like I was leaving him stranded in the middle of nowhere. I couldn't keep looking at him like that if I wanted my chance to walk away.

Even days later, that image was projected in my brain. I couldn't move on from it, and that left me in a sour mood. If I could have backed out of this trip to Boston, I would have. I couldn't barely stand to be around my team. I was lucky most of them didn't bother with me anyway.

Part of me wanted to text Wren like I usually did when I was away, but I knew I couldn't. That made me miss him in a whole different way. I couldn't have him in any capacity, even just as someone to talk to when I was away and lonely. He probably wanted nothing to do with me now. The thought made me feel like there was a pit in my stomach.

The whole thing with Wren let me block out the fact that I was going to play against Elijah later on today, that I would have to face him, that there was potential that I would have to see Fox again. Those things seemed to pale in comparison to what else burdened my mind.

I went through the motions for the morning skate. Nobody bothered with me like usual, but I could feel Rojas's stare. He just felt guilty and didn't want a repeat of last week. He was right to be worried about that. I had no idea how I'd react to playing against Elijah.

After our morning practice, I showered and got changed before heading out to the bus that was going to bring us to our hotel. What I didn't expect was for Elijah to walk up to me with a big grin on his face like he was happy to see me.

"Landon! I was hoping I'd run into you here," he said, patting me on the shoulder.

The shock must have been showing on my face because Elijah let out a chuckle and pulled his hand away from me.

"I've been wanting to talk to you since I ran into you and Wren last week," Elijah said, his tone more serious but still friendly.

"You have?" I asked in disbelief. It was still so surprising to me that Elijah even wanted to look at me let alone speak to me.

He nodded. "Yeah, I was hoping you'd come by later. I kinda peeped your schedule and saw that you're playing Harvard tomorrow, so you're staying in the city tonight right?"

"Yeah, we are," I replied. "But I don't know if that's such a good idea."

Not only was hanging around with Elijah going to exacerbate my guilt and make me want to puke my guts out, but his boyfriend would want to murder me even more than he already did if he found out about it. No matter how much I wanted to truly make amends with Elijah, I still didn't know how. It still hurt too much to think about him and all the pain I caused him, which wasn't really fair. He was the one that was caused pain, but it was me who couldn't get my shit together.

"Please," Elijah said. "I really just want to talk and I promise I told Fox to stay away."

I felt like I couldn't say no to him. I'd probably do anything he asked just to rid myself of the painstaking guilt I felt.

"Okay," I relented.

"Awesome!" he said, genuinely looking excited. "I'll meet up with you here after the game. Good luck tonight!"

And with that, Elijah walked away and into the rink. Rojas was already walking toward me when Elijah was still out here.

"Who was that?" Rojas asked when he reached me.

"An old hockey teammate," I answered. The two of us walked onto the bus together and he, of course, sat beside me.

"You're rooming with me by the way," Rojas told me as the bus pulled away from the rink.

I just nodded at him, trying not to show my annoyance.

Rojas was the only person on this team that paid me any attention, so instead of being able to ignore whoever I was rooming with, he'd be there trying to make conversation with me when all I wanted to do was wallow in self-pity over my failed relationship.

When we got to the hotel and got our room assignments, Rojas and I made our way to the room. As soon as we entered, I put my stuff down near the entry and went over to the bed to pull up the sheets and check the seams.

"What are you doing?" Rojas asked, throwing his bags down on a chair in the corner of the room.

"Checking for bugs," I muttered.

Wren would want me to check for bugs. He thought of the little things like that.

"Oh, I've never thought to do that," Rojas said as he walked over to the other bed and copied what I was doing.

"I'm going over my old teammate's place tonight," I told Rojas after a moment. "You can take my stuff back to the room right?"

He nodded. "Sure can."

"Thanks."

I did my best to avoid Rojas after that. I got changed into some comfortable clothes and lounged in bed with my earbuds in for a while until we had to go downstairs for lunch. Soon after that we had to go back to the rink for the game.

Surprisingly, Coach made no changes to the lines from the previous week. There was no telling how much he'd actually play my line though.

I avoided looking at the other side of the ice during warmups. Although I didn't think I would freeze up against Elijah like I did against Fox, I didn't want to be affected by him. Elijah was a defenseman, so if we were on the ice together, he'd be covering me.

When the game finally started, Coach put my line out there first. I surprisingly played well, not letting Elijah's presence distract me. His team, however, was playing great. They were one of the best teams in the league. We didn't come here expecting to win, but we put up a decent fight.

What really made them good was their defense. Their goalie was nearly impossible to get a puck past and Elijah and the rest of the defense were relentless on the ice, blocking shots and intercepting passes.

I had turned the puck over a few times, but so had the rest of my team. It only started to bother me when I saw Cooper and his friends looking at me and whispering. The absolute last thing I wanted to deal with was that tool.

We were back in the locker room after losing 3-1 when Cooper came up to me. The coaches and Rojas had already said their pieces. Everyone was showering and getting dressed. I had just showered and got into my street clothes when Cooper came over and bumped into me, nearly sending me on the floor.

"What the fuck is your problem?" I snapped, turning to face him.

I was still working on my anger, but my emotions were running high. It wasn't that easy to put a cap on my anger when I was already so emotional about other things. This was what my therapist, and Wren, meant when they said anger was a secondary emotion. It was fueled by other emotions, a way to release or express something else.

Cooper looked so smug when I turned to him. He didn't look the least bit guilty like he told me he was back when we roomed together last. People like him didn't really know what guilt was. He didn't like that his actions made him feel uncomfortable, but he didn't have actual remorse for what he'd done. And there was no doubt in my mind that he continued to let his friends believe that I was the one who had made a move on him, just to make himself seem better than he was.

"You're playing like shit, that's my problem," Cooper said, the smug smile still on his face. His friends were looking on, all with grins.

"I don't see you out there scoring goals," I said, my hands in fists at my sides. I was not going to hit him. I couldn't hit him. But I wanted to so badly.

Cooper brushed that comment off. I knew this whole show wasn't about how I was playing. It was all to make him look cool and tough in front of his friends because they thought I had some sort of crush on him.

"I think maybe all the men out there for you to gawk at is too distracting," Cooper said, which caught the attention of the people around us.

My sexuality wasn't a secret. Most, if not all, of the guys on the team knew about it. These were guys I had played against in the past, guys who I played with in summer leagues, guys who knew other guys I played with. And those who I had no prior connection with heard it from others. Word got around.

It wasn't the fact that he brought up my sexuality that made me angry, it was the fact that he was trying to use it to embarrass me, to imply that I gawked at every man in this locker room, every man on the ice.

And maybe if I cared more about being pleasant, if I wasn't already so fucking sad and frustrated with my life, I would've been able to let it go.

"I think that might be the problem you're having, not me," I spat, looking him dead in the eyes. "Considering you fucking kiss-"

I couldn't even finish my sentence before Cooper was on me. He punched me in the cheek, right under my eye and then kept going at me. He knocked me down and sat on top of me while I shielded my face with my hands.

I was seeing red. I couldn't even feel the pain with how angry I was. With all the strength I had, I grabbed onto Cooper and threw him off of me, causing him to slam into the lockers beside us. Before either of us could get up, we were being pulled off the floor and held away from each other.

Rojas had a hold on Cooper, dragging him away presumably to one of our coaches. It was Shea who had me, but he let go as soon as Cooper was out of the room.

"You good man?" Shea asked, walking in front of me to look at my face.

"I'm fine," I said. "I gotta go."

"You should really go get that cleaned up," Shea said.

I sighed, knowing he was right. I shouldn't really go to Elijah's with blood dripping down my face. I went to one of the trainers who cleaned my wound before I left to where Elijah was waiting for me.

"Are you okay?" Elijah asked upon seeing me. "Did you get hit during the game?"

"It's nothing. I'm good," I told him, though he clearly didn't believe me. I was still trying to calm my breathing because of the whole ordeal.

Elijah didn't press the issue and instead started directing me toward his dorm. He made small talk the whole way there to which I just hummed and nodded along. He seemed a lot happier now than he had last year, and that

made me feel a little bit better. At least he was doing well now, even if I caused him pain in the past.

"So, as you know, I wanted to talk," Elijah said once we were behind closed doors and settled in his room. He sat up on his bed while I sat on a chair near his desk.

"Yeah," I said, willing him to go on. I didn't know why but I was nervous about what he was going to say.

"Well, first of all, let me get it off my chest that Fox told me about what happened last weekend," Elijah started. "His version at least. That's not really what this is about though. I've just been wanting to talk. I think the two of us need to clear the air."

"Clear the air?" I asked. I braced myself for what he was going to say next, trying to be prepared for whatever words he had for me even if they made me feel even worse about myself.

Elijah nodded. "I'm not sure I ever told you that I forgive you."

My eyes widened. "What?"

Elijah didn't have a chance to respond before there was a loud knock on the door. He rolled his eyes like he knew exactly who was on the other side.

"Elijah!" Fox's voice came through the door. "Open up!"

"Go away!" Elijah shouted back. "For real! I told you not to bother us!"

Fox knocked on the door again, jiggling the handle.

"I'm not going to go away so you might as well just open the door," Fox responded, causing Elijah to roll his eyes again.

"He can be so annoying sometimes," Elijah said to me. "Though I'm sure you know all about annoying Ridleys."

"I can hear you!" Fox shouted.

"Quiet down! I'm coming," Elijah said, hopping down from his bed and moving toward the door.

My heart started beating rapidly. I wasn't ready to see Fox again or have him in my face again. And I wasn't sure there was much Elijah could do about it once he opened the door.

Elijah opened the door to reveal Fox leaning against the door frame, looking at him with an annoyed expression.

"You are a nuisance, you know that?" Elijah said to him.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm aware," Fox replied, moving past him to come in the room. He looked over at me, his expression staying the same, before dragging over a chair from the other side of the room and sitting down.

" *Fox* ," Elijah whined, shutting the door and moving toward him.

"You know how I feel," Fox grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest.

"You know how *I* feel!" Elijah responded.

I felt like I shouldn't be there. Not with the two of them arguing. Fox seemed to be doing all he could to ignore my presence anyway.

"I can go," I said, starting to get up.

"No," the two of them said at the same time.

Confused, I lowered myself back down onto the chair.

"Landon and I are going to talk and *you* ," Elijah started, pointing down at Fox from where he stood, "are going to keep quiet."

I didn't want to talk with Fox there. It would ruin any chance I had to be completely open with Elijah. I didn't want Fox seeing me any more vulnerable than he already had.

Elijah sat back down where he was and faced me.

"As I was saying before we were rudely interrupted," he started. "Landon, I forgive you."

I was silent for a moment, not able to make sense of this.

"But how...?" I asked, causing Fox to let out a snort. Elijah shot him a glare before responding.

"Micah explained some things to be about your situation," he said. "Not in a lot of detail, just stuff that helped me understand you better. The things you did to me are not excusable by any means. They caused a lot of harm, but I know you had a lot going on. At least I could go to my dad's and be okay. I know you didn't have that option."

I didn't like the thought of Micah telling Elijah things about me, but I could understand why he did it. He wanted Elijah's forgiveness for me. He knew how much the guilt burdened me and he wanted to take that burden away.

"I thought I'd never be able to forgive you," Elijah continued. "But looking back on everything, I feel so guilty sometimes."

"Guilty?" I said, shocked. "What the hell do you have to feel guilty for?"

"We were friends," he said. "Me, you, Micah. If Micah and I had just paid a little more attention, if we just noticed something was going on with you at home, maybe we could have helped you sooner."

"Elijah," I said, my jaw clenched and fists by my sides. "We really don't need to talk about this. Please."

He looked at me with a sad smile and I felt like I had to puke. I couldn't help but wonder just how much Elijah knew about my home life or how much Fox knew. I hated not knowing and I hated that the two of them knew this much about me. It made me feel so stupid.

"We don't have to," Elijah assured me. "I just wanted to tell you that. And that I want you to be happy."

I let out a deep breath and clenched my eyes shut for a moment.

"And also, you know, you and Wren kinda make sense," Elijah continued, causing Fox to let out a scoff. "Like I can so see you guys being a couple."

"We're not a couple," I said.

Elijah looked confused. "You're not? That was the vibes I was getting from seeing you two together. And from what Fox told me about last weekend."

"We were kinda, I think. But not anymore."

"Wait a fucking minute," Fox interjected, grabbing my attention and turning in his seat to face me. "Did you two fucking break up?"

"We weren't really serious," I told them. "That's what he told you, right?" I asked Elijah.

"Oh, he didn't mean that," Elijah replied. "I could tell as soon as he said it he was lying."

"Wait," Fox interjected again. "You're telling me Wren's acting all mopey and depressed because he's fucking heartbroken?"

"He's what?" I asked, my eyes widening.

"His friends were messaging me all worried about him," Fox said, looking at me briefly. He seemed to be a lot calmer than he was last weekend, but still wanted to make it clear he didn't like me. "Saying he was having some sort of mental breakdown."

"Mental breakdown?"

"Yes, dipshit, keep up," Fox snapped. "I thought I told you not to hurt him? Now a week later he's all depressed and shit?"

"Fox, be nice," Elijah chastised.

I had no idea what to think of this. The Wren I knew didn't let his emotions show. There was no way he could be heartbroken over me the way I was over him.

" *You* need to get back to Providence and figure shit out with him," Fox said, pointing at me.

"I thought you didn't even want us together," I replied. This whole situation was a giant mess.

"Look, I don't like you and I won't pretend that I do," Fox started. "But I'm honestly sick of fighting with my boyfriend about you! And if Wren's genuinely serious about you to the point of him being so not himself without you, then you need to go make shit right with him. And I do too probably."

If I thought I could focus on hockey for the next day, I'd be wrong. There was nothing I could think about other than Wren.

**

Thanks for reading leave your thoughts !

39

Landon Reilly

I didn't even get to play in the game against Harvard on Sunday afternoon. That was probably for the better. There was no way I'd have been able to focus on the ice, not with how much Wren was occupying my mind. The thought of him heartbroken and lonely hurt more than I cared to admit. And the fact that I caused it made me feel even worse.

I was the first one on the bus that would take us back to campus, not even bothering to wait for Rojas, but he was sure to find me as soon as he stepped on. Cooper was stuck up at the front of the bus with Coach, still in trouble from what had happened yesterday.

Rojas sat down beside me like I expect him to.

"You left the locker room pretty fast yesterday," he said. "You wanna tell me what the hell is going on with you and Cooper?"

No, I didn't want to tell him that at all. I wanted to forget it even happened and to forget Cooper even existed. I didn't need Rojas in my business about it either. There was nothing to be done about it other than move on.

"I heard from some of the guys that he's been saying that you kissed him? But I don't think that's true. It seems like it was the other way around," Rojas continued when I didn't answer.

"It doesn't matter," I muttered. Nothing mattered to me less at that moment. What mattered was that this fucking bus got moving so I could get back to Providence and back to Wren.

"It does though," Rojas replied. "I wish you'd have told me that he was messing with you."

"I don't need you trying to protect me." I was trying not to snap at him. He was the leader of the team, and he felt the need to make sure everything was good with the team. I knew what that felt like even if I epically failed at it.

"Don't think of it as protection," he said. "It's more like I got your back. I have everyone's backs. I don't want anyone on the team to be messed with or targeted."

Rojas was like what a captain should be; always looking out for everyone, making himself available to everyone if they needed him. It was what I should have been when I was captain of my own team in high school. But instead of doing that, I targeted Elijah because of my own deeply fucked up problems and made everyone on the team fear me instead of look up to me. It was something I would never be able to change, never be able to take back. And it was something I had to continue to learn to live with and make amends for.

"Cooper is a deeply insecure person," I muttered, looking out the window as the bus started to move. "As long as he stays away from me and stops talking about me then I'm good."

Rojas didn't say anything after that, and I was glad he wasn't going to make me spend the whole ride back to Providence talking. I put my earbuds in and turned my music up, willing the time to move faster.

The drive back to Providence was almost two hours and I felt every second of it. I could usually drift away on a long bus ride, but now that I was aching to get back it felt like eternity.

It was nearing eight o'clock in the evening by the time the bus finally pulled onto campus. I was up and out of my seat, practically mowing over Rojas in the process to get off this fucking bus. As I stood outside and waited for the compartment holding our things to be opened, Coach approached me.

"Reilly, I want to talk to you," he said, lowly enough so that only I would hear.

I mentally cursed at him, because *of course* he wanted to talk to me when all I wanted was to get the hell out of there.

"Sure, Coach," I mumbled, moving to grab my bag as soon as the bottom of the bus was opened. "What about?"

He shot me a knowing look because it was quite obvious what it was going to be about. I stood with Coach while he waited for everyone to grab their things and be on their way. Once everyone was leaving, he led me over to his car.

"I'm not going to tolerate what went on in the locker room with John," Coach said once we were at his car, calling Cooper by his first name.

I knew better than to try and make excuses and place blame. I just had to stand here and listen to whatever Coach had to say, then run over to the Brown campus like my life depended on it.

"I've suspended John from the team until further notice," Coach continued, and I cringed at what that could mean for me.

If he was going to suspend me from the team, that would most likely affect my scholarship, and there was no way I was affording to stay here without it.

I was panicking. It momentarily made me forget about going to Wren.

"Coach," I started in a rushed tone. "I'm here on scholarship for hockey and-
"

"Calm down, Landon, I'm not suspending *you* ," Coach interjected, holding his hand up for me to stop.

I let out a sigh of relief.

"But if he did anything to you, I need to know about it," Coach continued. "Anything other than what he did in the locker room because that will affect whether or not he comes back to the team at all."

I really didn't want to talk about this with Coach at all. I didn't care if Cooper played on the team or not, I just wanted him to leave me alone.

"He just doesn't like me," I told him. He looked at me with disbelief on his face, but didn't press me further.

"Alright, well if you can think of anything, anything at all that you think I should know, please feel free to tell me," Coach responded.

I nodded at him and the two of us said our goodbyes before I was rushing toward the Brown campus, lugging my bag on my shoulder. It was freezing out, my ears feeling like they were about to fall off.

When I got to Wren's building, I sent Jess a text hoping she would be at Stella's so she could come down and let me in. She was downstairs within a couple of minutes.

"What's up?" she asked as she threw open the door. "What happened to your face?"

"Nothing. Is Wren up there?" I asked, following her up the stairs.

"I don't know. I've been at Stella's," she said. "What, a few days away and you had a change of heart?" She said it with a teasing smile.

I sent her a tentative smile back.

"Something like that," I said.

Jess was the only one I had told about what had gone on with Wren, she was really the only one here I had apart from Wren.

The two of us got up to their floor and made our way down the hall to Stella's and Wren's rooms.

"Good luck," Jess whispered, squeezing my shoulder before letting herself back into Stella's room.

I let out a breath and knocked on Wren's door. The person I didn't want to see was the one that answered.

"Oh, thank God," James said, pulling me into the room.

I glanced around the room, but Wren was nowhere in sight. James released my arm and shut the door behind us.

"Where's Wren?" I asked, backing away from him slightly.

"No clue!" James replied. "He hasn't been here all weekend, but I'm sure he'll be back eventually. You need to talk some sense into him. He's been acting like a crazy person."

The last thing I wanted to do was sit around with James to wait for Wren, but that was my only option. I put my bag down under Wren's bed and sat down at his desk. He had things all over the desk, papers, pens, open books, notebooks. It was so uncharacteristic of him.

I started cleaning up the desk, putting the papers into a neat pile, putting the pens back into the cup where he held all his pens and pencils. I put his notebooks in a pile next to the papers and his books on the small shelf in the desk.

James was just watching me, and I sat there and pretended I didn't feel his stare even though it was pissing me off the longer it went on.

"Can I help you?" I snapped, looking up from the desk. He was standing over on his side of the room, leaning back against his bed.

James grinned over at me, and I hated that that reminded me of Wren.

"You don't like me very much," James stated. He said it like he already knew that, not like it was some new revelation. "If it's because of my history with Wren, you don't need to worry about it."

I was embarrassed that he could see right through me about this. It was obvious my problem with James had nothing to do with him and everything to do with my jealousy over him and Wren.

"Seriously, he doesn't like me the way he likes you, never has," James continued.

"I don't give a shit."

James's grin widened. "You clearly do."

I glared at him until I heard the door unlocking. My eyes immediately shot over to the door just in time to see Wren walk in with a bag slung over his shoulder.

"Now where have you been?" James asked him in a teasing tone. "We have a guest here who has been waiting for you."

Wren looked up from the floor and his eyes landed on me.

"Oh, hello," he said, shutting the door behind him.

I stood up from the desk chair, but I didn't move toward him. He seemed more closed off than usual, and he was clearly unprepared for me to be here waiting for him. I didn't want him to feel ambushed, but I needed to see him, to talk to him even if I was nervous about what the outcome would be. For all I knew, Wren could tell me he wanted nothing to do with me. He could, and probably would, deny what Fox had told me about him to save his pride and to keep me in the dark. He was never one to open up.

"Well, I'm going to head out," James said, giving me a look. "I'll see you guys later."

Wren stepped aside to let James out, but he didn't come any closer to me. The two of us stood in silence for a few moments until Wren finally spoke up.

"What happened to your face?" he asked, his eyes catching on my bruise.

"We can talk about that after," I said, starting toward him. "Wren, I-"

My breath caught for a moment. I was so caught up in trying to get to him, I didn't think about what I was going to say. What could I say, really? 'Sorry

for pushing you away and causing you to be depressed, please take me back?' That was stupid.

He was looking at me expectantly, waiting for the rest of my sentence.

"I, uh, I talked to Fox while I was in Boston," I finished.

Wren looked shocked, and it was a look that I had never seen on him before. He was always good at hiding his surprise, though that could have been because not much surprised him.

"Did he hit you?" Wren asked in a low voice, his eyes narrowed and his hands in fists at his sides.

"No, we just talked. With Elijah too," I assured him. "Fox said something about Stella and James reaching out to him."

Wren rolled his eyes and came closer to me, setting his bag down beside mine under the bed.

"They were just being dramatic and so was he," Wren said.

He was a liar. I could tell he was acting strange. He could barely look at me when he usually had no problem with eye contact and giving me his full attention. His expression was strange like he was focusing too hard on keeping it neutral.

"Look, I want to- I want to talk about us," I said, stuttering a bit. I had no idea how to say what needed to be said, to make him want me back. Wren was always better at talking and he wasn't saying much.

"Us? What about us?" he asked.

"Well, I guess I wanna say I'm sorry for the way I reacted to what went down over Thanksgiving weekend," I started. "For pushing you away, avoiding you."

He just stared at me, saying nothing.

"I guess just a lot goes on in my head and it's so overwhelming sometimes," I continued, running my hand through my hair nervously. "I didn't want to cause shit between you and your family because you actually have a family that gives a shit about you. It just made me feel bad thinking about it. I felt like I wasn't good for you, I didn't know if you were actually serious about me."

I was laying it all out there and he was saying nothing. It made my nerves overbearing.

"Can you say something?" I asked, breathless. "Please."

"I suppose that's my fault," Wren finally said.

"No, it's-"

"It is," he interjected. "I made you feel that way. I made you feel insecure when I should have been clearer about my feelings."

It shocked me that he was admitting fault for this.

"I heard you tell Elijah we weren't serious," I said. I wanted him to know that I'd heard.

"I was lying," Wren admitted. "Sometimes lies are easier than the truth. They're easier to grapple with, they make you feel like you're actually in control of a situation even when you're not."

"Yeah," I agreed. I could understand that.

"But you mustn't apologize for the way you reacted," Wren said, finally looking at me with a soft gaze, with affection. "I was never angry at you for that."

"But you were upset," I replied. I had heard that he was more than upset, that he was heartbroken.

He shrugged. "I suppose I was. It seems you have taken a spot in my heart, and I was wholly unprepared for you leaving me."

It seemed I was always caught between wanting to strangle him and wanting to hold him. He was always so infuriating, speaking in a way like he was trying to confuse me or speak around the subject so that he wouldn't have to say exactly the way he was feeling. But this wasn't confusing, and I knew what he meant. Wren cared for me more than he ever wanted to, and me leaving him affected him more than he cared to admit.

"Landon," Wren said, my name melodic coming from his voice. "When you said you're not good enough for me, or for anyone, that you're still the same person you were before, I need you to know that's not true."

My mouth opened in disbelief at his words. I didn't know what I expected him to say, but it wasn't that.

"You are gentle, and kind, and sensitive," he continued, my shock increasing at every word. "You don't need to be alone to punish yourself."

Tears welled in my eyes before I could stop them. No one had ever said anything like this to me, and I never expected it from Wren. It was overwhelming to hear. I felt like I was undeserving of his words, like they were lies he was trying to sell to me. But he looked so serious and sincere as he said them.

Wren came over to me as my tears were about to fall and caught them with his thumbs under my eyes.

We looked into each other's eyes for a moment, soaking each other in. There was so much said between us with no words exchanged. Most of it being *I'm sorry. Forgive me. I want you. I need you.*

Then I threw my arms around Wren and hugged him close to me. It took him a moment to respond, but he wrapped his arms around me and tightened them to hold me close. I rested my head on his shoulder. He leaned his head against mine. And the two of us stood there in each other's embrace for an indeterminate amount of time.

The two of us had never hugged like this. I didn't even know if the two of us had hugged *ever,* but I wished we had. I felt warm and cared for in his

embrace. It felt like we were perfectly shaped for each other to hold.

Wren pulled back slightly, keeping his arms around me. I picked my head up to look at him, and he stared at the bruise on my face with a hard expression. He brought his hand up to my face and I flinched away.

"Let me look at it," he said softly, his touch light as a feather on my injured skin. "Are you going to tell me how this happened?"

"One of my teammates came at me in the locker room on Saturday," I told him. His eyes narrowed, his mouth turned down in a frown.

"Who?"

"Just some asshole. It's fine."

"It's not fine. Who?"

I sighed. "Remember that guy we saw outside the coffee shop one day?"

Wren nodded. "The same one I saw with you at the bar who left you there."

I barely even remembered that, but Wren had a sharp memory. Of course, he would remember something like that.

"Why did he do this?"

"He has it out for me. A while back I saw him one night when he was leaving a party, totally drunk off his ass, and he came onto me, actually kissed me, and now I guess he's all worried I'm going to out him to everyone, so he's been telling the whole team that I kissed him. He's just trying to look all tough in front of the team."

Wren's frown deepened, the hand not touching my face tightly gripped the back of my shirt.

"Wren, chill," I said. I could tell he was getting upset over this. I just wanted to move past it. "It's fine. I just want to forget about it and move on."

Wren's expression softened, his grip loosening on my shirt.

"So, are we... are we good?" I asked him, starting to feel self-conscious.

"Do you mean 'are we good' as in are we back together?" he asked.

"Uh, yeah I guess."

"That's what I would like," Wren replied.

"Okay, that's what I would like too."

"That's settled then," Wren said. And then he kissed me.

And at that moment kissing him felt as essential as breathing.

**

Thanks for reading! Leave your thoughts:)

40

Wren Ridley

Ever since Landon showed up in my dorm room on Sunday night, the two of us didn't spend a night apart. Whether we were sleeping at his dorm or mine, we were always together. I even drove him to therapy on Wednesday afternoon after a slight argument about it. He didn't want me acting as his chauffeur, but it was no bother to me. I drove him to practice afterward, kissing him lightly as he got out of my car.

"Have fun at practice my angel," I said as he grabbed his bag from the back seat.

Landon scoffed, but I could see the blush rising on his cheeks. He acted like he hated terms of endearment, but I had been trying different ones to see what stuck and he blushed every time. He wanted to hate it, but he secretly liked it.

"That's almost as bad as the last one," he said, standing outside the car and talking to me through the open window.

"I thought you liked pookie?"

"Absolutely not."

He absolutely did. I would have to start using that one more often.

Landon shook his head at me and made his way toward the practice facility. Once he was inside, I could move onto my plans for the afternoon.

Jess had been kind enough to give me some insight on this Cooper guy. Apparently, he lived in the same building as Jess, next to Landon's building, and lived with one of the other guys on the hockey team. According to Jess, Cooper and his roommate never locked their door. They were both too stupid to remember their keys, so they just always left it unlocked.

Also, according to Jess, Cooper still had to attend the team practices even though the coach wasn't allowing him on the ice. So, at this time, the room was empty.

I had debated in my head what I was going to do about this Cooper situation. My first instinct was to slash his tires, but that would have been too difficult. It wasn't like I could just slash someone's tires in broad daylight, and my nights were spent with Landon. I wasn't going to leave Landon one night so I could go seek revenge on this guy, so the logical thing was to do it when I was going to be away from Landon anyway, and when I was guaranteed not to get interrupted.

This time of day, it was quite busy on campus. People were going in and out of the dorms constantly, so it wasn't hard to get inside the dorm. Even if it was difficult to get in, Jess could have come to open the door for me.

I parked my car in a far spot in the lot, grabbed my bag, then snuck in the dorm past someone who was entering and made my way to the stairwell. Jess had told me Cooper's room was on the third floor, the last door on the left.

Luckily when I got to the third floor, the hallway was empty. I hurried down the hall, light on my feet, and made my way to the last door on the left. Sure enough, the door was unlocked.

I opened the door slowly, poking my head in to ensure no one was in the room before I entered.

The room was a mess, and I wasn't even exaggerating. There were clothes all over the floor, open bags of chips on the beds, trash around the trash can from these guys trying to throw it in and missing. It smelled foul like they hadn't done their laundry all semester.

I didn't even want to set my bag down anywhere, fearing the mess and stink would follow me out of here. But I had to do what I set out to because I couldn't just let what Landon had told me slide. The poor roommate would be collateral damage, but I couldn't find it in me to care.

I set my bag down and got to work.

First, I approached the desk on the left side of the room that had a laptop sitting on top of it and opened it. The screen lit up and John Cooper's name greeted me. Now that I knew which side of the room was his, I got started.

I couldn't go too far or do anything that would let Cooper trace this back to Landon. He would probably end up messing with Landon even more if he suspected that this had anything to do with him, so I had to keep it completely impersonal even though I wanted to warn him off of Landon. At least he would have to suffer a little.

I went to where my bag was and took the first bag out.

After class and while Landon was at therapy, I went to the pet store and bought bags of all the different kinds of bugs they sold to feed reptiles. I had crickets, roaches, worms, and flies.

The first bag I picked out had crickets, so I let those loose in Cooper's closet. I pulled out more bags and let the insects loose in various areas of the room. I tried to keep to Cooper's side of the room, but it probably wouldn't matter. Oh well.

Finally, I let loose some roaches and worms on his bed and that was the last of the bags I had. I didn't stay too long after that. I had to get out of there to keep from getting caught. Not that I wanted to stay long with all those creatures in there anyway. That room probably already had bugs before I let mine loose.

When my work was done, I went to the library back on my campus and started working on things for my finals. Only a couple of my classes had actual exams while the others had essays and projects. I was pretty much done with everything except for the exams.

And then it was time to pick Landon up from practice. I parked outside the facility and waited as other members of his team walked out. I tapped on the steering wheel as I waited until he eventually came out, looking freshly showered, his hair damp and his cheeks flushed.

I unlocked the door as he walked up to the car. After he put his bag in the back seat, he got in the passenger's seat with a tired sigh.

"They don't have hair dryers in there?" I asked, turning in my seat to face him.

He shot me a quizzical look.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"You're always coming out of there with damp hair," I said. "It's not good to do that when it's cold."

It was December now. The air was frigid.

Landon looked at me with disbelief like he couldn't tell if I was kidding or not. I clearly wasn't. It was freezing outside. The ends of his hair were a little frozen from his short walk from the building to the car, and they only began to thaw when he got inside.

"No, Wren, they don't have a hair dryer in there," he said slowly.

"Hm," I hummed. "Well, they should."

Just as I looked away from him, I saw Cooper walking out of the building with two other guys. I couldn't help the grin that creeped on my face at the thought of him going back to his dorm to the mess I created.

"That's Cooper, right?" I asked Landon, motioning toward him.

Landon nodded. "Yeah, why?"

"No reason," I said. "Are you buckled, sweetheart?"

Landon shook his head at me and buckled his seatbelt.

As soon as he was buckled, I started driving. I was sure to drive slowly by Cooper, watching him as we went by. He looked at me, his face filled with confusion, and I waved before leaving the parking lot.

"What the hell was that?" Landon snapped. "Don't do that shit."

"I was just being friendly."

"No, you weren't. You just want to start shit."

" *He's* the one who started shit if I remember what you told me correctly," I pointed out.

I hated that guy, and even the thought of him made my insides burn with rage. To take advantage of anyone the way he had was unforgivable. But the fact that he did it to Landon made it personal. Not only did he kiss him against his will, but he continued to mess with him, and that was downright idiotic. He was lucky Landon didn't go around punching people anymore.

"I can handle him myself," Landon replied, turning his head on the headrest to glance at me.

He didn't really look annoyed with me. I could always tell when he was actually annoyed versus when he was trying but failing to be. He liked to act like he didn't like me worrying about him, but it was a new and welcome thing for him to have someone worrying about him.

"What do you want for dinner?" I asked him after a few moments. I was driving toward the Brown campus since we stayed at Landon's last night.

Landon shrugged in response and looked out the window.

"We could get takeout," I suggested. "Or I can bring you to the dining hall."

"I don't want to waste my money on take out every night," he said.

"Well, obviously, I'd pay," I replied to which he rolled his eyes.

Landon hated when I spent money on him. He thought I was pitying him or something because of his situation, which was not the case. Not only did I have money from my parents, but I got a little extra from helping some other students with their work. Landon couldn't even have a job because of hockey.

Landon glared at me, but continued to listen to the takeout suggestions I was making until we finally decided on one. We agreed on salads, which was probably a good thing for me if the two of us planned on doing anything tonight. Once we picked up the food, we went back to my dorm where James was typing away on his laptop at his desk.

James turned to face us when we walked in.

"Did you bring me dinner?" James asked.

"No, why would I?" I asked him, setting the food down on my desk.

"I texted you!" he exclaimed. "I have to finish this paper *tonight* . I can't leave this spot for even a minute."

I shrugged. "I'm sure we'll have some leftovers you can have."

James rolled his eyes. "Gee. Thanks." He turned back to his work.

"You should probably go to the library anyway," I said, motioning for Landon to sit down on the desk chair.

"Is this you trying to kick me out?" James asked, still facing his computer. "Now that you have Landon back, you want to make up for how mopey you were when he was gone?"

"I was not mopey."

James turned around with a wide grin and looked straight at Landon.

"He's such a fucking liar," he said to him. Landon looked between the two of us with a strange expression. "He was so not himself the whole time. He was avoiding me and Stella. He stole my vodka!"

Landon looked at me with wide eyes. "You what?"

"That's enough out of you," I snapped, pointing at James. "Don't you have an assignment to finish while we eat our delicious food?"

James narrowed his eyes at me then shut his laptop and stood up.

"You know what? I'm going to go get dinner then go to the library," he said, gathering his things.

"That sounds perfect," I replied, happy he would be leaving.

"You're so mean sometimes," he muttered before leaving the room.

"You were drinking alcohol?" Landon asked as soon as we were alone.

"He exaggerates," I assured him. "It was a sip."

"Do you wanna, like, talk about it?" Landon asked awkwardly.

I paused for a moment, unsure of what to say. I didn't want Landon worrying about my behavior from when we were separated. It was a useless thing to worry about, really.

"There's nothing to talk about," I eventually replied. "What I would like to do is eat dinner."

I grabbed James's chair and dragged it over to sit next to Landon. The two of us ate quietly for a little bit.

"Do you like your food?" I asked, noticing he was eating slowly, pushing the food around.

He looked up from the desk. "Yeah, it's good."

"Do you still have problems eating certain things?"

He looked surprised at my question, and I hoped it wasn't insensitive of me. I wanted to be more careful about what I said to him. Thankfully, he didn't look angry with me.

"Sometimes, I guess," he replied. "But therapy is helping with the whole self-hatred thing. And with getting my father out of my head."

"You know, you can talk to me about these things. If you need to or want to."

Landon stared at me for a moment then nodded. "I know."

The two of us eventually got onto the topic of the impending winter break which was only two weeks away at this point.

"I have to stay in the dorms," Landon told me. "I still have hockey. I'll have Christmas week off."

"And what are you doing for Christmas?"

Landon leaned back in his chair, done with dinner. There was still some left on his plate, but I was surprised at how much of it he actually ate. I didn't comment on it.

"I don't know. Probably spend it with the Hansons. I know they'll want to go to church, but I don't think I can. And then they'll feel bad and stay home with me even though they really wanna go."

"Why don't you just come over to my house while they go to church?" I asked. I said it without thinking, but I didn't take it back. I just subconsciously assumed that the two of us would spend Christmas together.

"You want me to come over for Christmas?" he asked, disbelief clear in his tone, his eyebrows lifting.

"Yeah, why not?"

"Would your parents be okay with that? After the whole Thanksgiving weekend thing?"

"Fox pissed them off that weekend, not you," I reminded him. "I'm sure as soon as I tell them I'm bringing my boyfriend over for Christmas, they'll be thrilled."

Landon's eyes widened. "Boyfriend?"

"That's what we are, aren't we?"

Landon grinned. "Yeah, that's what we are."

Then I remembered I hadn't even told my parents I was bisexual. Now I had to decide if I should tell them or if introducing Landon as my boyfriend was the best way to go about it.

"So, you'll come over?" I asked in a hopeful voice.

"Yeah, if it's okay."

"It will be," I assured him. "The only problem is Fox."

"I think me and him are okay," Landon said. "I *think* ."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"Seriously, I think he's more concerned about you being okay than he is about me."

I had no idea what the two of them said to each other, but it was hard for me to believe that Fox was just suddenly okay with my relationship with Lanodn. He was so stubborn and set in his was. It took a lot to change his mind, and I wasn't sure that one talk with Landon had done it. As long as he could be civil during Christmas, it wouldn't be an issue.

"What about Olivia?" I asked him, suddenly remembering his sister still being stuck in that house with their parents.

"I'll have to see her while I'm home," he replied. "But she'll be stuck with our parents for Christmas."

Landon and I cleaned up and got ready for bed after that, though I knew we didn't plan on sleeping yet. I took an extra-long shower, getting myself ready for whatever could happen next.

When I got back to the room, Landon was lying in my bed, one hand behind his head propping himself up. He looked me up and down, his eyes catching

on the towel wrapped around my waist. I grinned at him and got up on the bed. His eyes widened.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his eyes wandering down to my bare chest.

"Whatever you'll let me," I replied.

Landon brought his eyes back to my face, his stare intense. He pulled me down on top of him and caught my mouth on his. His lips moving against mine were hurried like he was worried I'd slip away if he took his time.

The towel was barely covering me anymore, so I used one hand to throw it on the floor and situated myself better on top of Landon. My lips eventually matched the pace of his, and I could feel him hardening beneath me.

Landon grabbed me by the back of my thighs and flipped us over so now I was on my back beneath him. He moved his mouth to my neck as I pulled at his shirt, hiking it up until he eventually pulled away long enough to take it off.

"You can take your pants off too," I said in a teasing tone.

He was about to oblige, but paused for a moment.

"Wait, what about James?" he asked.

"Is this you asking for a threesome with James?" I sat up.

Landon glared at me, shoving me lightly back down.

" *No* ," he said. "What if he comes back while we're..."

"He won't," I assured him. "He'll be out for a while."

Landon didn't look convinced, but he took the rest of his clothes off anyway. While he did that, I reached into my nightstand to get a condom and lube then handed them over to him.

He stared down at the things in his hand then looked at me.

"Do you need me to, uh, get you ready?" he asked awkwardly.

The look on his face was so sweet I almost laughed, but I stopped myself. I didn't want him thinking I was making fun of him.

"I did in the shower," I told him. "But I'd never say no to your hands on me."

He rolled his eyes, but grinned down at me as he opened the bottle of lube.

Then he slowly put his hands on me, and I felt like I couldn't breathe for a moment. He only had one finger in me, and it was enough to interrupt my breaths.

"Is this okay?" Landon asked. This time I did laugh.

"Yes," I said, grinning. "It's perfect."

This encouraged Landon to keep going. He added more fingers, leaving me squirming beneath him, until he finally hiked my knees up closer to my chest and entered me.

I let out a loud moan as he moved in and out, looking directly into my eyes the whole time. It was the most intimate sex I'd ever had. I didn't think I'd ever looked someone in the eyes like this because it never mattered to me who I was with like it did now.

When the two of us finished, Landon cleaned us up with a cloth and threw the condom away then got back into bed with me, kissing the top of my head as he pulled me close to him. I kissed his chest before laying my head on it.

The two of us stayed like that all night, and we were sleeping peacefully until the next morning when we both woke up to banging on the door.

"James, open the fucking door!" Anthony yelled, slamming his hand on the door.

I picked my head up from Landon's chest and looked over at James who woke with a startled look on his face.

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"What did you do?" I asked.

James didn't answer. He just got up from bed with a sigh and went over to open the door. As soon as the door was opened, Anthony pushed his way inside and shut it behind him, pushing James further into the room with his hands on his chest.

Landon and I shared looks of confusion before turning our attention back to the spectacle happening in the middle of the room.

"You are obnoxious and so infuriating!" Anthony yelled, his hands in fists. "And you have no right! No right!"

"Anthony-"

"Shut up, James!"

It was sort of comical watching the two of them argue. Anthony was so much smaller than James. Looking up at him probably strained his neck.

"You have no right butting into my life!" Anthony continued. "Warning guys away from me at the bar? Seriously? What the hell is the matter with you!"

"Can we talk somewhere-"

"I don't get it. You don't even want me!" Anthony exclaimed.

I nearly laughed at that. Of course, James wanted him. That was obvious.

"You-" Anthony started again, but was quickly cut off by James cupping his face in his hands and planting his lips on his.

Anthony's eyes went wide as James kissed him, but he did nothing to pull away.

"Oh shit," Landon whispered.

James pulled away, keeping Anthony's face in his hands.

"Can we talk somewhere else?" James asked.

"I..." Anthony trailed. "I have to go to work."

He stepped away from James and looked over at the two of us.

"Just pretend you didn't see this whole thing," he said to us, going toward the door. "I'm sure I'll see you at the coffee shop later."

"Sure thing, my favorite barista," I replied.

Anthony sighed and turned his attention back to James.

" *You* I will talk to later." And with that, he basically vanished from the room.

"Well, that was entertaining," I said as James walked back toward his bed. Landon elbowed me lightly, but he had a slight grin on his face from my comment.

"Not one more word," James mumbled, dropping himself face first onto his mattress.

Landon and I got out of bed and got ready for our run, which was now something we did together every morning.

And spending all my time with Landon was something I was afraid I was already used to.

**

Thanks for reading!

Please leave your thoughts!

41

Landon Reily

The blast of warm air as I entered the coffee shop made my cheeks burn. Wren held the door open for me and got in line where Anthony was manning the register. His gaze lingered on us for a moment then he quickly looked down at his screen.

"Well, good morning, Anthony. Long time, no see," Wren greeted in a teasing tone when it was our turn at the counter. "How is this fine morning treating you?"

"Good morning, what can I get for you?" Anthony responded in a bland tone, acting as if he didn't know either of us.

"I see, you're embarrassed, but it's alright," Wren said. "We'll have two medium hot peppermint mocha lattes."

I frowned at that. I was used to Wren ordering my coffee, but he had been ordering the same thing for me for a while now. Trying something new made me nervous.

"Name for the order?" Anthony asked.

Wren looked back at me with a grin, clearly enjoying how uncomfortable Anthony was with what happened this morning.

"James's roommate," Wren replied.

Anthony looked at him with a deadpanned expression, clearly annoyed with Wren's antics.

"Your order will be right out," Anthony replied and motioned for us to move to the side so he could help the next customer in line.

"You really have to be the most irritating person in the room wherever you go," I said to him, sticking my hands in my pockets to warm them up.

Wren shrugged, a grin still decorating his annoyingly handsome face.

"That's just who I am," he said.

"Why did you change my drink?" I asked as I watched it being made.

"It's seasonal," Wren said. "Perfect for Christmas time. You'll like it."

Once we got our drinks, we went over to our usual table, and Wren stared at me until I tried the drink. I took a small sip and set the cup down. Wren looked at me expectantly.

"You like it," Wren stated.

"It's alright," I replied. "I prefer the caramel."

"Hm," he hummed, taking a sip of his own drink. "So, are you ready for finals?"

I was dreading finals, actually. It constantly felt like I had too much on my plate with school, hockey, therapy, Wren.

"Not really," I admitted, and I felt kind of stupid for it. I was talking to someone who was probably ready for finals at the start of the semester.

"I can help you prepare," Wren offered.

I was saved from having to answer by Anthony walking over to our table and taking a seat beside me.

"Can we help you?" Wren asked, raising his eyebrows at him.

"I'm sorry for the way I acted this morning," Anthony replied, though he didn't sound all that sorry. His voice was stilted like he was reading from a script.

Part of me felt bad for Anthony, but that was mostly overshadowed by my embarrassment due to the fact that when he barged in the room this morning, I was barely clothed under a blanket with Wren. Not that Anthony probably even noticed that. He was too busy with James.

"No need to apologize," Wren said. "I found it quite entertaining. Though, I am dying to know more about what happened last night that made you so angry."

Anthony glared at him. "You can ask him about it."

"And I will."

"I don't know how you put up with him," Anthony said to me with a scoff.

I just shrugged. There was no way to explain it, really. Not in a way that anyone but Wren and I would understand. Wren wasn't the same with me as he was with other people. And I didn't know how I would feel about it if he was. Part of me liked being the only one Wren was different for, the only one that could see more layers of him. And he was the only one who could see more of me.

Anthony left the table and Wren took a few sips of his drink before he brought up finals again, much to my dismay.

"I can help you prepare for your finals," Wren repeated.

I let out a sigh. "You don't need to do that."

"You have a lot going on," he said. "There's no shame in needing some help."

He said that like it was so easy, but he had no idea what it felt like to have a boyfriend who was so much smarter than you knowing you needed help with stupid Gen Ed finals. It was humiliating, having my ivy league boyfriend see how much dumber I was than him.

"And if I don't want your help?" I snapped, and instantly winced at my tone.

Wren just smiled over the rim of his cup.

"Sorry," I muttered. "I shouldn't snap at you."

"Embarrassing you wasn't my intention," Wren replied, always knowing exactly how I felt. "I would just hate for you to be overwhelmed."

My heart warmed at that. I was still so used to being defensive around Wren. I had to wrap my head around him actually being open about his care for me.

"I'll let you know if I need you," I relented. Something told me that was all Wren wanted: to be needed.

A little while later the two of us walked back to Wren's dorm and each took a shower. Wren had suggested we take a shower together, but I just slammed the bathroom door in his face, my cheeks red with embarrassment.

Wren had some of his clothes laid out for me when I got out of the shower. The outfit was something I wouldn't have picked out for myself, so I thought of this as Wren's way of getting me to dress better.

He set out light cream colored pants that were rolled at the ankle with a dark green sweater and a white shirt to go underneath. I put the clothes on, and the pants were a little snug in the waist. The sweater, which would have been over sized on Wren, was a closer fit for me.

When Wren got out of the shower, just a towel around his waist, he looked at me and nodded.

"What?" I asked, looking down at the clothes and suddenly feeling self conscious.

"I just thought that color would look nice on you," he explained. "I was right. It brings out your eyes."

My first instinct was to cover my face with my hands, shielding Wren from seeing the embarrassment on my face. But I didn't because the look on his

face made me keep my eyes on him. He was smiling at me as he looked me over, clearly happy with what he'd done.

"Pants are a little tight," I told him, standing up from where I sat at his desk.

Wren shrugged and opened up his closet to pick out his own clothes.

"Maybe that's what I'll get you for Christmas," he said. "Some pants like mine."

"You don't need to get me anything for Christmas."

I hated Wren spending money on me on food and coffee. The last thing I wanted was for him to actually buy me gifts.

"Okay, I'll just get you something for fun," he said with a grin, pulling his shirt on over his head.

I didn't want him to know it, though I was sure he already did, but I was nervous about Christmas. Not only would I be seeing his whole family again after what happened on Thanksgiving weekend, but it would be the first Christmas I'd be without my family. My last Christmas with them soured my memory of the holiday, and I didn't want to sour it for anyone else.

*

I could tell my father was in a bad mood just by the tension in the air when I went downstairs. It was Christmas morning, and he could still find a way to be mad on what was supposed to be the most joyous day of the year.

I sighed before I entered the kitchen, the smell of coffee filling the room. Dad sat alone at the kitchen table while Mom was making breakfast. She looked over at me when she heard my footsteps, but she didn't say a word.

He expected me to sit across from him silently and wait to be spoken to. That was how he operated. He didn't like me speaking to him unless spoken to.

Before sitting down at the table, I grabbed a mug from the cabinet and poured in coffee, not adding anything else to it. Then I went to sit across from my father.

"That's your caffeine for the day," he remarked, his hard gaze on me.

I didn't say anything, just nodded. I could tell he was already agitated. It probably had something to do with how I'd been playing lately. The team wasn't doing well, and even if I played better than anyone on the ice, he still saw it as my own personal failure. He thought that since I was the leader of the team, I was only as good as the worst guy out there. If I couldn't make everyone on the team play well, then I was failing. I was a disappointment.

"Coach Adams's wife had her baby two nights ago," my father started. "Dave is going to take his position while he's out."

That was just great. My father's buddy would be coaching my team and keeping an eye on me for him while we were at the tournament. It wouldn't surprise me if he pushed Dave to take the coaching position just for that purpose.

"Hopefully he can motivate you to play your best," my father continued. "And if you can't play your best, then you need to make it so your opponents can't either. Especially that Elijah. You can't let him beat you at the tournament."

"We'll beat him," I responded. We had to. It wasn't just about the team. It was about my pride too.

My father looked at me with a hard to read expression. It was like he was trying to see inside my brain.

"I don't know that you will," he said. "I'm not so naive, Landon. I know how you felt about that boy, I know you feel guilty about what happened with him last year. But what you need to realize is that he's beneath you. He is filthy and you cannot lower yourself to be like him. You've resisted what he has embraced. You have a stronger will than him, but you need to continue

working at it. And you need to show him just how beneath you he actually is."

My throat closed up listening to my father speak. He had been alluding to my sexuality more often lately, and I didn't know what to make of it. It was usually something neither of us spoke about, but there were times where he would indirectly bring it up, and it unsettled me to my core.

"And I'm afraid you can't do that with your skill alone," he continued. "You need to break him down. Go after him. Beat him up if you have to. Show him that you are stronger than him. If you can't do that, we're going to have problems."

He narrowed his eyes at me as if daring me to disagree with him, to resist what he was telling me to do. I knew that I couldn't, and he knew that I wouldn't. He had me under his thumb. He could tell me to jump and I'd ask how high. I hated myself for it.

By the serious look on his face, I knew he would make me regret it if I didn't do what he said. Winning for him wasn't just about the sport, it was about status and pride. If I lost to Elijah, that would put me beneath him, and my father would not be able to stomach that. He would do whatever he saw fit to make sure I regretted it.

"I know you don't want to know what will happen if you disappoint me," he said after a few moments.

"No, sir."

"So you'll make me proud."

"Yes, sir."

*

"Hey," Wren said, his voice pulling me from my thoughts. He was fully dressed now, standing in front of me.

He sat down on my lap, his legs on either side of mine.

"You were zoning out," he said.

"Sorry," I muttered.

Wren took my chin in his hand and angled my face toward his.

"Don't be sorry, darling," he said, lightly kissing my lips. "We both need to head to class. I can drop you off on campus."

Wren dropped me off outside of the building where my morning class was held. We were in the final weeks of the semester, and I couldn't wait for classes to be over.

School always overwhelmed me, though it was worse when I had my father trying to force me to be perfect in every way in his eyes. I needed to be his straight-A student, his hockey star, his perfectly polite son. Even without him, I still felt that pressure of needing to be the best, even though I was failing at that. I didn't have straight-As anymore. I wasn't the best guy on the hockey team. I wasn't charming and polite and known by everyone.

Later on at hockey practice, I was ambushed by Cooper. His face was red with anger as he grabbed onto the front of my shirt and shoved me against the wall.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he growled, his face close to mine.

"What the fuck is wrong with *you* ?" I shot back, shoving him. "Get off me!"

"Don't play dumb!" he exclaimed. "You know what you did!"

"I really have no idea what the fuck you're talking about!"

"The bugs!" he said. "All the fucking bugs you let loose in my room! I mean, who else would've done that?"

I shot him a look of confusion, backing up slightly.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said, trying to keep my calm. "But maybe you're not as well-liked as you fucking think you are. I'm sure I'm not the only person on campus who can't stand you."

"You're fucking crazy," Cooper spat. "You know how insane that is to let all those bugs loose in someone's room? They had to evacuate our whole building to make sure they got them all out of there. We had to stay in hotels!"

"I still don't see how this has anything to do with me," I replied.

Cooper shook his head at me.

"You are batshit insane," he muttered before walking away.

I was still confused, yet relieved, as I watched him walk away. I wished I could thank whoever let the bugs loose in Cooper's room. If that made him think I was so insane, hopefully he would leave me alone so I wouldn't do anything even more insane.

What has become a new normal for me was Wren picking me up after hockey practice, so when I saw his car sitting in the parking lot when I left practice for the night, I wasn't surprised. He waited in his usual spot for me, the car idling. He unlocked the doors when I got to the car, and I put my hockey stuff in the back seat before getting in the car beside him.

"How was practice?" he asked as soon as I was in with the door shut.

"It was fine," I replied, buckling my seat belt. "Hey, you wanna hear something funny?"

"Yes," he said, maneuvering the car out of the parking lot.

"I guess someone let a bunch of bugs loose in Cooper's room," I told him with a laugh.

"Oh, that is funny."

"And he thinks it was me," I continued. "Said I'm batshit insane. I'll take the credit if it gets him to leave me alone."

"Did he say he would leave you alone?" Wren asked.

"No, but he seemed so disgusted I don't think he'll risk anything like that happening again."

"Hm," Wren hummed. "Well, that's good."

Wren drove us down toward my dorm and parked the car. I dropped my stuff off inside and then the two of us walked toward the dining hall for dinner. I swiped the both of us in, glad for the unlimited meal plan I got for being an athlete.

We got our food and sat down at a table in the corner of the room. Before either of us could start eating, Jess came over and sat down right next to me.

"You are evil," she said, pointing a finger at Wren. "You could've warned me that was your plan!"

"Well, when I was asking you about it, I didn't have a plan yet," Wren replied.

"A text would have helped. We do live in the twenty-first century. It's not like you could only send me a message by pigeon."

"What are you guys talking about?" I asked, looking between the two of them.

"Oh, hi Landon, sorry I was so rude not to greet you," Jess replied with a smile. "We were just talking about how my whole dorm building had to evacuate and I had to hope and pray they caught the bugs early enough that they didn't make it to my room."

Realization washed over me. Who was crazy enough to do something like that who also had beef with Cooper? The person sitting across from me with a faux innocent look on his face.

"The bugs. That was you, wasn't it?" I asked him.

"I cannot confirm or deny," Wren replied.

Jess rolled her eyes. "It was him," she said. "It was me that told him Cooper's room is always unlocked. I knew he was going to do something. I just didn't know it was going to be *that* ."

I was caught between being annoyed with him and being grateful. On the one hand, I didn't want him fighting battles for me, but that was part of being in a relationship. We were supposed to fight battles for each other. I wasn't used to having someone in my corner, so I didn't know how to take it.

"But we were lucky," Jess continued. "They told someone right away and they got them before they spread. I was freaking out though."

"Well, that's fortunate," Wren said, taking a bite of his food.

"It's kinda sweet in a way," she started, "what he would do for you."

She got up, saying her goodbyes, and walked away.

Wren and I were silent for a moment, just staring at each other until he spoke.

"Are you angry with me?" he asked.

It wasn't until he asked that that I realized I really wasn't.

I smiled at him. "You're crazy."

He smiled back.

**

Thanks for reading, leave your thoughts!

42

Wren Ridley

James was last-minute packing all the things he was taking home for winter break, clearly trying to ignore my stare as I sat across the room from him. I had finished my last final and had my car packed with my things. Now all I had to do was wait for Landon to finish his, and the two of us would go home.

"I'm surprised you haven't asked yet," James said, glancing over at me.

"I know you're just dying for me to ask," I said. "Or dreading it."

James scoffed. "I don't dread anything."

"You're hilarious," I replied with a laugh. "Go ahead and tell me what you want to tell me."

"Okay, maybe I have been trying to avoid telling you this," James said, moving back and forth on his feet in a nervous manner.

"I figured."

"Short story is Anthony and I were never actually dating," he started. "We were seeing each other, hooking up. He wanted a commitment. I was scared of commitment. You know how it is."

"And the longer version?" I had a feeling I knew at least part of what he was going to say, and I couldn't go an entire winter break with the suspense.

"The longer version is I was hooking up with multiple people at the same time, including you," he continued, raising his eyebrows at me. "Before I knew Anthony wanted to be exclusive. He had an issue with me hooking up with you because he thought I was really into you, which I guess I was."

He looked away from me for a moment.

"I never thought me and you were gonna, like, date or anything," James said, looking back to me. "But I liked hooking up with you, and Anthony, but he wanted to be exclusive, and I wasn't ready for that, so I just told him that. And he thought it was about you even though I told him it wasn't."

"I'm flattered," I said sarcastically.

"Shut up," he replied in a whiny tone. "Anyway, we kinda fought about it and I ended up telling him I didn't want him."

"Which clearly isn't true," I added.

"Right," he confirmed. "It was like I wanted him to
only be with me but I could be with whoever, and that's just wrong and stupid of me. I wanted his exclusivity, but I didn't want to give him mine and I didn't realize that until recently."

"When you started following him to bars," I added for him with a smirk.

"Shut *up* ," he snapped, though I could tell he wasn't annoyed, just embarrassed. "Yes, I started noticing myself getting... jealous when I saw him with other people. I didn't follow him to the bar the other night. It was just a coincidence."

"Sure it was."

" *It was* ," James urgently tried to convince me. "I may or may not have had a little too much to drink and started telling guys he was talking to to back off, which obviously pissed him off."

"Because you can't commit to him, but you expect him to be available to you."

" *No*, I never expected that," James denied.

"I'm just saying that's how he sees it," I replied. "You're confusing him."

"I'm confusing myself," he muttered. "But I do want him. I want to be with him. And yes, before you say it, I know it's unfair of me to expect him to want to be with me now after all this time."

"Well, I think he does anyway," I said. "Even though it's unfair."

"I guess we'll see after break," James said with a sad smile. "That's what he decided. I don't think he trusts me to be committed, which I totally get."

"What better way to deal with your commitment issues than throwing yourself into a committed relationship?"

"Says you," he shot back. "You were the biggest commitment-phobe I knew and look when you are now."

"Oh, we weren't talking about me."

James shot me a wicked smirk, any emotions he was showing before vanishing in favor of mocking me by turning the conversation around.

"Oh, you mean you don't want to talk about how much of a mess you were when Landon left you?" he asked with a grin. "You can't even use Anthony to make me shut up anymore."

For once, I didn't know how to respond. I just looked at James, and his grin fell.

"It was actually kind of scary seeing you like that," James said after a moment.

"Did you really have to involve my brother?" I asked incredulously.

James shrugged. "I mean, *yeah* . He was your only sibling I could remember the name of. It was Stella's idea, actually. We had no idea how to get through to you, so she was trying to think of your siblings' names because you have like a million of them."

"I have five."

"That you never talk about," James replied. "I actually didn't even really remember Fox's name. I just remembered he plays for Northeastern, so we looked up the hockey team."

It was hard for me to admit, even to just myself, that I was embarrassed about the way I acted while Landon and I were separated. It made it even worse that Fox was aware of it. All I could do was act like I wasn't embarrassed by it, pretend that it wasn't as bad as James and Stella made it seem.

"That was quite unnecessary," I told him, moving to sit up on my bed.

"Whatever, it's over now," James said. "Just don't let Landon break up with you again."

"When are you leaving?" I asked, sitting crisscrossed on the bed with my back leaning against the wall so that I was facing him.

"As soon as I get all this packed up," he replied, zipping a bag he just finished stuffing clothes into. "I know traffic is going to be a fucking bitch."

"And you're staying home the whole break?" I wondered aloud. "Not going to see Anthony?"

"Not unless he wants to see me."

I decided to be nice and help James bring his things out to his car. He threw an arm around me in an unexpected hug before he left. A little while later, I went to Landon's dorm to pick him up.

Landon had a lot less to bring home since he had to come back so much sooner for hockey. All he had was the rest of this week and next week off, and then he had to be back on campus to continue his season.

"You're not done packing?" I asked him as he came down to let me in the building.

"I've been busy, and I think I just bombed my stats final," he said with a huff, leading me up the stairs.

"You did not bomb it," I assured him.

Landon had spent a lot of time studying the last few days. The only class he let me help him prepare for was philosophy, and he had taken that final earlier on and he seemed pretty confident about it.

"Oh, but I did," he muttered as we got to his room. "Seriously, I have no idea what was even on that test. I used to be good at math. I don't know what happened."

"I'm sure you did better than you think."

Landon just rolled his eyes at that. He packed up the rest of his things and the two of us made our way out to my car. I turned on the audiobook the two of us were listening to. We had gotten back into it a few days ago, and Landon seemed to be enjoying it even if he refused to admit it.

Landon paused the book a few minutes later.

"Are your parents cool with me coming over for Christmas?" he asked, his leg shaking in the way it always did when he was anxious.

"Oh, I haven't talked to them about it yet."

"You haven't?" he asked, shocked. "Wren, Christmas is next week!"

"Yes, I know."

"So, when were you planning on asking them?" He sounded annoyed now. I could feel his glare without even having to look at him.

"Soon," I replied.

"And when is that? Today?"

"Could be."

"Wren," Landon said in a stern tone. "I'm not going if you don't talk to them about it first. I'm not just going to show up. That's embarrassing."

"I will talk to them about it," I assured him. "It's just that I haven't really spoken to them about... about my sexuality yet."

I felt queasy even admitting that to him. I wanted to be able to share my insecurities freely with him, but it was harder than I thought it would be. I could accept my own faults and fears. It was something else entirely to have someone else accept them.

"Wren, I think they know," Landon said softly.

He was probably right, but that didn't take away any of the unease I felt about the situation. It was irrational and pointless to feel the way that I did, but that didn't stop me from feeling it anyway. I knew my parents, their values, their love for all their children. My sexuality wouldn't change anything in their eyes, yet it was still hard for me to admit it. But if I wanted to be with Landon, I had to do it.

"I will tell them today," I promised, and that seemed to please Landon. Tension fell from his shoulders, the look on his face softened.

"Will you meet the Hansons?" Landon asked in a low voice, timid, like he was afraid of what I might say.

"Of course."

A little while later, I pulled up in front of Landon's house to drop him off. It was sort of an unspoken thing that we both understood; I needed to tell my family about us alone.

Landon leaned over the center console and placed his lips over mine in a slow, sweet kiss.

"Let me know how it goes," he said, pulling away for a moment, then stealing one more kiss before he grabbed his things and got out of the car.

I took the long way home, gathering my thoughts on how exactly I would tell my parents about Landon. By the time I got home, I still had no clue what I was going to say.

I parked my car in my usual spot in the driveway and went inside. The house was quiet. The only reason I knew someone was here was because I could hear the television on in the living room. I followed the sound to see my mother on the floor in front of the TV doing a yoga pose. The coffee table was pushed up against the wall, and the couch was pushed so far back it was almost blocking the entrance to the room.

"Mom," I called out, causing her to turn and look at me while maintaining the pose she was in.

"Hi honey!"

"Where is everyone?"

She moved into a sitting position on the mat and paused the yoga video she was watching. I sat on the floor next to her, and she pulled me closer to kiss my cheek.

"Your father is picking up Robin from the airport," she started. "Fox is on his way home, Fawn is out with Ava, Colt's upstairs."

This was probably the best chance I had to tell my mother about Landon. Just the two of us, one on one with no pressure.

"Mom, I-"

But of course, it didn't stay just the two of us for long. A moment later, Dad walked in the door with Robin behind him, each of them carrying a suitcase. It would seem like the logical thing that Robin would go back to LA soon after Christmas to not have to brave the weather back home, but he insisted on staying for his entire winter break. And the two of them came in at the exact wrong time.

"Hi baby!" Mom exclaimed from her spot next to me.

Robin placed his suitcase down and came to sit on our mother's other side, embracing her welcoming hug.

"Are you happy I took your advice and flew into Boston?" Robin asked, looking over at me. "All because you didn't want to pick me up."

"I couldn't have picked you up. I had to bring Landon home."

"Oh, I'm sorry I didn't realize three of us couldn't fit in your car."

He rolled his eyes at me and leaned back, bracing his hands on the floor to hold himself up.

"Boys, enough," Mom lightly scolded. "What were you saying before, Wren?"

Dad came into the living room after setting down Robin's other suitcase. He sat down on the couch which was pushed back, far enough away from us that he wouldn't be able to hear us if we talked too quietly.

"What's going on?" he asked, to which Mom just put up her hand to stop him from speaking as she looked at me expectantly.

I didn't want an audience for this, but I was sure that if I procrastinated any longer, I wouldn't tell them. And that would make Landon angry with me, which I didn't want. I only liked making him angry when it was on my own terms.

"I wanted to ask you something," I started. The look she gave me urged me to continue. "Is it alright if my boyfriend comes over for Christmas?"

It was out there, and I wished it felt like a weight had been taken off my chest, but it didn't.

"Of course, Landon can come over!" Mom exclaimed happily, her wide smile distracting me from what she said for a moment.

"Why are you assuming I'm talking about Landon?" I asked incredulously. It couldn't have been that obvious.

Robin let out a loud laugh, to which our mother ignored.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Mom said, not actually looking sorry. "But it *is* Landon, right? Your boyfriend?"

"Well, yes."

"I've been *dying* to ask you about it, but I didn't want to before you were ready," she admitted, adding to my confusion.

"So, you're gay too?" Dad asked from behind us on the couch.

"Leo!" Mom shouted at him with a glare.

"What!" he yelled, exasperated. "I support him! I'm just clarifying."

"I'm bisexual," I answered, slightly embarrassed. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I didn't know if you'd be okay with it."

That instantly made Mom's face fall.

"Oh, honey, of course we're okay with it," she said, wrapping her arms around me.

Dad came over to sit on the floor on the other side of me, wrapping his arms around me so that I was sandwiched between my parents.

"We love you, Wren," Dad said.

I was slightly uncomfortable with the affection, but I welcomed it anyway.

Mom hummed in agreement.

"We love you so much, and of course Landon is welcome over any time," she added as the two of them pulled away. "Now, tell me everything. How did you two connect? How long have you been together? What was your first date?"

It was the last question that struck me. How was it possible that Landon and I had never really been on the date? Unless I counted the countless coffee dates, but those weren't really dates.

"It's fairly new," I told her. "We haven't been on a date."

"Well, you two have a whole winter break to go on dates."

"Dates are important," Dad added. "It keeps the romance alive!"

Mom playfully rolled her eyes, but she agreed with him.

"So, were you ever going to tell me about you and Landon or were we just going to keep pretending I didn't already know?" Robin asked with a playful smirk after our parents left the room.

"You didn't know anything," I lied. I had already suspected that he did know.

He rolled his eyes. "Fat chance. It was so obvious."

I ignored him and pulled out my phone to text Landon.

To: Landon
I told my parents about us. You're welcome to come over for Christmas.

His reply was instant like he had been waiting by the phone for me to message him.

From: Landon
so it went good?

To: Landon
It went well.
Mom already suspected it anyway.

From: Landon
i'm glad you told them

To: Landon
I'm glad too. It was not as big of a deal as I made it out to be in my head.

From: Landon
i'm proud of you

Those were the words that took the weight off my chest, made my breathing easy, made me feel light as a feather.

**

Thanks for reading, please leave your thoughts about the chapter !

Also, I keep getting asked if the story is over . It's not over, and I will let you know when we're in the final chapters. I don't have a count on the total chapters left yet.

43

TRIGGER WARNING: use of homophobic slur

Landon Reilly

"I think I'm a little bigger than you," I told Wren.

He was making me try on these Christmas pajamas his mom had bought for him because apparently she wanted to get me some to match the family. It felt a little strange doing something like this considering for my whole life Christmas was a drab holiday spent at church with my miserable parents. But I would at least try to be enthusiastic, especially since I wanted to make a better second impression on Wren's family than my first.

"I don't know. I think a tight clothes look is sexy," Wren replied with a shrug, his eyes roaming up and down my body.

I hated that I blushed at that. My face scrunched in anger and irritation, which only caused Wren to grin at me.

I turned to look at myself in the mirror and Wren's eyes landed on my ass as my back faced him.

"Maybe you do need a bigger size," Wren said, still staring. "I don't think either of us want all that showing in front of my parents."

I felt even more heat rise in my face.

"No shit!" I exclaimed.

Wren just refused to believe I was bigger than him. He was tall and lean with a small waist. I had a more athletic build. The only time I really fit in his clothes was when they were oversized on him.

He walked up beside me and smacked my ass with a wide grin on his face.

"No need to worry, darling, I'll tell my mother to size up," he said, trying his best to sound endearing but all he did was annoy me more.

"I look ridiculous."

Wren leaned down from behind me and rested his chin on my shoulder.

"Imagine how much more ridiculous you'd look if you were the only one not wearing this on Christmas morning," he replied.

He was right, of course. He knew how much I didn't want to stand out. And he knew how much I wanted to make a better impression on his parents. If his mom wanted me wearing Christmas pajamas to match the family, then I would wear Christmas pajamas to match the family.

"You know, you've never taken me on a date," Wren said after a few moments.

I turned to face him with a confused expression on my face. He stood up to his full height, taking his chin off my shoulder.

"What do you mean? We've been... out," I replied, realizing we really hadn't been on any actual dates.

"Those don't count."

"Well, what do you mean *I* haven't taken you on a date? You haven't taken me on one either!"

"I suppose that's true," he said. He thought for a moment. "You could take me ice skating."

"You don't even like ice skating," I reminded him.

"But it would be a good date," he said. "You could hold my hands and pull me along."

I narrowed my eyes at him, trying to decide if he was being serious.

"You actually want to do that?"

Wren shrugged, but he didn't give me any other suggestions, so I assumed that was what he wanted. And now I had to plan some date to take him on when I had never planned a date in my life.

"Okay... we could go after dinner tonight?" I suggested, but it came out more like a question.

Tonight we were having dinner with the Hansons, and Wren would be meeting them for the first time. I was less nervous than I thought I would be. Wren was good at speaking to people, and he wasn't one to get nervous. I had no doubts that Anne and Matthew would like him.

I changed out of Wren's pajamas and handed them back to him. Wren went through my clothes and picked out a sweater and jeans for me to wear. It seemed like he liked picking out clothes for me, so I just let him.

"When will Anne and Matthew be home?" he asked as I got dressed.

"Any minute I think," I replied. They were out running some errands and last minute Christmas shopping, and they would pick up the food while they were out.

It felt a little strange that Wren would be meeting Anne and Matthew. They weren't my parents, but they were a big part of my life. And just last month Wren basically laughed in my face at the thought of meeting them. So much had changed since then. I looked at Wren now and couldn't believe we had come so far in such a short time.

"So, are you saying we don't have time?" Wren asked, stepping closer to me.

"Time for what?" I asked.

He brought his mouth to my neck, kissing me skin slowly and sensually. His hands gripped my waist then moved lower, Wren bringing one to palm the front of my jeans. I let out a shaky breath, tilting my head back slightly

to give him more access. I felt a smirk against the sensitive skin of my neck, his hand beginning to rub against me.

"Wren..." I trailed, my voice low and breathy like it was starting to be hard for me to inhale.

"Hm?" Wren hummed. "What do you want? Do you want me on my knees for you?"

Wren knew exactly what he was doing to me. It was hard for me to grasp just how much control he had over me. All he had to do was touch me and I'd be putty in his hands. It probably didn't even have to be a touch. It could be a look or a word and he'd have me.

"Yes, I want..." I trailed again. If he was feeling nice, that would be all I had to say for him to do whatever he was planning. If he was feeling like an asshole, he'd make me tell him exactly what I wanted in all the obscene words it required.

It was when Wren started unbuttoning my jeans that we heard the front door open.

"Shit," I muttered. Wren pulled away with a smirk.

"I suppose we'll have to save that for later," he said, his eyes moving up and down my body. "You might want to take care of that or cover up."

His eyes were zeroed in on where his hand had just been.

I blushed furiously at his words and pulled my sweater down so that it covered the front of my jeans.

"I hate you so much," I said with a scowl.

Wren looked at me fondly, leaning in to kiss my cheek.

"You don't." He was right. Of course, I didn't.

We stayed in my room for a moment before Wren motioned toward the door.

"Well," he said. "Introduce me."

I led Wren down the stairs and to the kitchen where Anne, Matthew, and Micah were setting the food on the table. Anne was the first to notice us when we arrived and she had a wide smile on her face.

"Hi guys!" she exclaimed, walking over to Wren with her hand held out. "It's so good to meet you, Wren. I'm Anne."

Wren shook her hand and then Matthew's as he walked over.

"It's lovely to meet you both," he said politely. "It's nice to see you again, Micah."

"Yeah, you too," Micah replied, grinning over at me like he was in on some type of secret I had no idea about.

After we got settled at the table with food on our plates, Anne and Matthew started asking Wren all sorts of questions, which would have made me uncomfortable if I were him, but he took it in stride. If Wren was good at one thing, it was talking, though he was good at other things too.

"So, Wren, how did you and Landon meet?" Anne asked. She sat across from him, giving him all of her attention. I had already given her a brief explanation on how we met, but knowing her, she was hoping for more details if she asked Wren.

"Well, Landon knew my brother last year, so I met him very briefly then," Wren told her. "But we ran into each other in Providence a few times and started hanging out." That was basically the same version of events I had given her.

"And you go to Brown? That's a great school," Matthew added.

"Yes, I'm very fortunate. I love it there," Wren said.

After a few more minutes of questions, Wren excused himself to go to the bathroom, and then all eyes were on me.

"He's so polite!" Anne said, grinning over at me. "And very cute too."

"Yeah, he is," I said, feeling slightly embarrassed.

I knew Anne and Matthew would like him, but it still felt a little strange introducing Wren as my boyfriend to them. It felt weird that they knew we were dating, but I liked it this way anyway. It made it feel normal in a way I never thought it would and never imagined for myself. I finally felt a little less bad about myself and my sexuality now that I could be here with Wren as my boyfriend, introducing him to my family. Next we would have to tell Livi, though I was sure she probably already knew or assumed.

"It seems like you two have come a long way since the last time I saw you," Micah said with that same grin from before.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What is that supposed to mean exactly?" I knew what he meant. I just wanted to know what that fucking smirk was all about.

"Well, before you could barely even admit to me that you were together, even though I saw you guys kissing-"

"Micah!" I exclaimed with wide eyes.

"Micah, don't embarrass him," Matthew said, then turned to me. "I'm glad you feel comfortable enough to introduce him to us. He seems like a wonderful boy."

Before I could say anything, Wren was back at the table and the small talk continued.

When we finished dinner, Wren offered to help clean up, but of course, Anne and Matthew wouldn't let him. So, the two of us got ready to go on our date.

We bid goodbye to the Hansons and got into Wren's car, starting toward the ice rink.

"They seem like good people," Wren said as he drove away from the house.

"They are," I agreed. "They, uh, really helped me a lot."

No one ever liked to admit they needed help, and I was no different. But I wanted Wren to know what they had done for me because he and the Hansons were all important to me.

"I was in a really dark place when everything went down with my parents," I admitted. "My dad, he tried to send me away to some conversion camp and I just kind of lost all hope. Anne and Matthew took me in and cared for me like I was their own son. They got me set up with a therapist, got me into college. They just treated me so much better than my parents ever did."

I looked straight ahead through the windshield, fearing that if I looked over at Wren, I would stop talking. It felt good to be vulnerable with him.

"It's kinda crazy how people following the same religion can get very different things from it," I continued. "Like my parents were so traditional. My dad was the man of the house and my mom was his subservient wife, and he expected me and Livi to listen to him without question."

I realized I was talking about them in past tense like they were dead. They kind of were in a way, dead to me.

"And the Hansons are the opposite," I said. "They're so loving and kind, exactly what you'd expect from people so religious. They don't expect me to be a certain way. They just let me be who I am."

"People often read the same book and get very different meanings from it," Wren responded, glancing at me briefly. "That doesn't justify how they treated you."

"I know."

Sometimes it was hard to realize that. Back when I lived with my parents, I thought I did deserve it, My father had instilled in me that I needed to do everything exactly as he said to otherwise I would get punished, and deserved whatever punishment he decided to give me. It was hard to get out of that mindset even after moving in with the Hansons.

"My dad... I always felt like he just hated me," I continued. "But I don't know if that's entirely true. He hated who I really was, but he loved me when I was what he wanted me to be."

"That's not love," Wren said. "I'm glad you're out of that situation."

I did too, obviously. But I was also glad that I had opened up to Wren a bit more. It felt like things were getting more and more serious with us, and I wanted him to really know me and understand me. And I wanted to know and understand him too. I never imagined I'd be sitting beside him, telling him all about how awful my father was to me. Not only was I quite embarrassed about it, but I hated thinking about it and reliving it, especially since there were still times I heard my father's voice in my head telling me how disgusting and wrong I was.

Wren reached out and put a reassuring hand on my thigh, squeezing it lightly. He left it there for the remainder of the ride to the outdoor rink we were going to.

When we got to the rink, it was busier than I think either of us expected. Wren had to circle around a couple times to find parking. Once we were parked, we waited in line to rent skates. I didn't want to use my own skates for this.

"You're going to have to help me with this again," Wren said as we found an area to sit to put our skates on.

I grinned over at him.

"Okay, let me do yours first," I said, kneeling in front of him.

I put his foot up on my knee and tightly laced the skates for him. I couldn't tell if he actually needed my help or if he was just doing this to make it feel more like a date, but I did it without complaint anyway. It was nice being able to do something together that I was better at than him.

Once Wren's skates were tied, I sat down beside him to do my own. Then we made our way to the rink, Wren gripping my arm to keep his balance as we walked down the path to the ice. I stepped onto the ice first, then held my hands out for Wren to grab onto. He slowly put one foot on the ice, waited a moment, then put down the other as he held onto both of my hands. I skated backwards as I pulled him along.

"By the end of tonight I think we'll get you standing on your own," I said to him, causing him to look up from his feet to stare at me.

"You can't let go of me," Wren argued, gripping my hands tighter. "You're supposed to want to hold onto me because this is a date."

"I *do* want to hold onto you."

It was kind of funny, but also a little unnerving, to see Wren so out of his element. He was always so sure of himself, nothing was out of his comfort zone. But ice skating was, and he wanted to do it just because I liked it.

"I just can't believe you can't skate," I joked, looking at him with fondness.

"It was never my thing," he said. "It was Fox's, obviously. My dad tried to get the both of us into hockey, but it never stuck for me."

I chuckled. "I didn't have much of a choice."

We did a few laps around the rink before Wren complained that he was cold and his feet were hurting. I brought him to the exit and back to where our shoes were, promising I'd go buy us each a hot chocolate.

As I stood in line, a familiar voice called out to me.

"Landon," Isaiah, an old hockey teammate from high school, said from behind me.

I didn't want to face him, but I had a feeling he wouldn't let me flat out ignore him. Isaiah was one of my closest friends in high school after I forced myself to drift from Micah and Elijah. He was ruthless and mean and nothing but trouble. He allowed himself to be manipulated by Elijah's stepfather which caused him and other teammates to go after Fox after the tournament last year.

"Isaiah," I replied, turning only slightly to look at him.

"Does your Daddy know you're back in town?" he asked with a sinister smirk.

"I'm assuming no." I pulled my hands into fists at my sides. It made me so angry to be near him, but I also wanted to be prepared to defend myself if he tried anything.

"Who's the guy?" He jerked his thumb back in the direction of where Wren was sitting.

I just shook my head at him, turning to face forward and move up in the line. Isaiah put his hand on my shoulder, jerking me toward him.

"You think you're just going to come back around here with some guy and no one would notice?" he asked, his hand tightly gripping my shoulder.

It pained me to think that I did think that. I thought I could just exist with Wren in our own bubble as if everyone I went to high school with wouldn't be back in town for the holidays.

I shoved his hand off of me and turned to face him completely.

"You think I give a fuck what any of you think?" I snapped. "You're all fucking nobodies to me."

"You're a liar, but I guess I shouldn't expect anything better from someone living in sin, parading around some guy like a fucking fairy."

I turned away from him, seething but not bothering to respond. I had to keep a cap on my anger. I couldn't be throwing punches out here in front of

all these people.

"You're a fucking disgrace, you know that?" Isaiah continued with venom in his tone. "You were supposed to be the pride of this town, going off to Notre Dame, the NHL, but now you're a sick, disgusting faggot who's better off dead. Your own father wishes you were dead. You know that's what he tells people when they ask about you? He tells them that his son passed away because that's better than the fucking truth."

I clenched my jaw and tried to block out his words, but it was no use. I heard every word and took each one like a punch to the stomach. I hated that his words stung, that they made my heart clench and my eyes sting.

I kept my back to Isaiah and moved forward in the line to order the drinks. Once the drinks were in hand, I went back to Wren without sparing Isaiah another glance.

There, with Wren, I would be safe.

**

Thanks for reading! Leave your thoughts!

Christmas chapter coming VERY soon

44

Wren Ridley

Christmas was always full of traditions in the Ridley household. There was the matching pajamas, which seemed more ridiculous as the years went on, the pictures in front of the tree, which always took way too long because Dad couldn't get the timing on the camera right the first few tries, the breakfast, which always left us so stuffed for the entire day that we sometimes had to save Christmas dinner for the day after. But my favorite one as a kid was getting to open one gift on Christmas Eve.

When I told Landon about this when I picked him up from the Hansons's house, he got all nervous.

"Please don't tell me your parents bought be gifts," Landon rushed out from the passenger's seat.

His face was flushed and his lips were swollen from our tiny little make out session that just ended. He looked so cute like that, it made me want to kiss him again.

I shrugged. "A few things."

Landon groaned, hitting his head back on the headrest.

"Don't be grumpy, it's Christmas," I said, starting to drive away.

"I'm not being grumpy," he said in a grumpy tone. "I just don't want your parents spending money on me."

"Well, it's *Christmas,"* I said. "It's the most capitalistic holiday of the year. Money will be spent."

Landon crossed his arms over his chest with a pout, which he didn't realize I found endearing.

I understood his aversion to people buying things for him. He didn't want to feel like a charity case, but what he failed to realize was that sometimes people just wanted to do nice things for other people. It was like he couldn't comprehend someone wanting to do something for him without expecting anything in return.

"Are you going to be mad if I tell you I bought you gifts?" I asked him.

He darted his eyes over to look at me.

"Gifts? As in multiple?" he asked.

I nodded. "A few."

"How many is a few?"

I shrugged, which only sparked his annoyance. He let out a deep breath and looked away from me.

"You're so annoying," he said. "Really, I don't know why I even like you."

I grinned at that. "You like when I annoy you, that's why."

Landon looked back at me and rolled his eyes, but he didn't deny my statement. He tried to hide it, but he did like when I annoyed him. He found it quite charming.

When we pulled up to the house, I could tell Landon was nervous. His posture was rigid, his jaw set tight. He wouldn't look at me, staring straight at the house.

"Fox isn't here yet," I told him. "He's spending some time at Elijah's before he comes home."

"Okay."

That didn't seem to make him feel any better. He still sat in the same position, now with his hands gripping the tops of his thighs.

I reached out and put one of my hands over his, causing Landon to turn his attention to me. His expression was so soft it made me want to pull him out of his seat and into my lap. I didn't do that, of course.

"You don't have to be nervous," I told him. "My parents already like you."

"I don't know how," he bitterly replied.

"Because you're such a nice boy," I said with a grin, bringing my hand up to pinch his cheek. Landon rolled his eyes again, swatting my hand away.

"Don't do that," he muttered.

"Come on," I said, opening the door. "Let's get inside. I'm sure my parents are staring at us from the window and wondering why we're taking so long."

Landon reluctantly followed my lead and got out of the car, grabbing his things from the back.

When we got in the house, my parents were standing in the living room trying to act like they hadn't been watching us. I knew they had just by the looks on their faces and their proximity to the window. Behind them, Ian was sitting down on the couch, his eyes glued to the television.

"About time you guys came in!" Dad exclaimed with a laugh.

"Leo!" Mom shouted.

"Told you," I told Landon with a nudge. "They were watching."

Landon forced a smile onto his face, trying to hide his embarrassment.

"We weren't snooping!" Mom lied with a wide smile. "We just saw the car pull in. Anyway, Landon honey, put your things down. How are you?"

"I'm good," he said, though his voice was a little higher than normal. "How are you?"

Mom took his bags from his hands and set them down before giving Landon a tight hug. He froze for a moment before returning the gesture. It made me think about how rarely the two of us hugged. I didn't even know if he liked hugs. All I knew was that he wasn't prepared for one of my mother's bear hugs.

"Don't suffocate him," I told her.

"Oh hush," she said, pulling away from him. "Fox and Elijah should be home any moment. Then we can put on our jammies, open a present, and watch a Christmas movie! Food's on the way!"

I nodded, grabbing onto Landon's arm.

"We're going to get settled and we'll be back down," I said, leading Landon up to my room after he picked up his things. He and Ian shared a look as we walked by, but nothing else.

"You guys have so many..." Landon trailed once we were in my room. "Traditions."

I placed his bags next to my closet and turned to face him with a shrug.

"My parents love their traditions," I said. "They're going to make us take pictures in front of the tree. And then they're going to pretend to be taking suggestions for what Christmas movie we watch, but we'll end up watching *The Grinch* like every year."

"It's nice," Landon said. "For Christmas to be so joyful like it's supposed to be. It's never been like this for me."

It hurt my heart a little to hear him say that. I didn't like thinking of Landon before I knew him, suffering with his parents.

"What is your sister doing for Christmas?" I asked. I couldn't imagine what kind of boring, depressing Christmas she would have to sit through tomorrow.

"Going to church probably," he replied. "And then having Christmas dinner."

"Would she like to come here?"

Landon seemed surprised by my question, his eyes widening slightly.

"I don't really know if she could," he said after a moment. "She has her ways of sneaking around though, so maybe."

Landon and I got changed into our matching pajamas and waited to be called down for dinner. When the time came, the rest of my family was already downstairs, with the addition of Elijah and Ian, all wearing the matching pjs.

"Hi Landon!" Elijah greeted cheerfully.

"I never get that kind of greeting from you," I said, to which Elijah rolled his eyes.

"That's because no one's ever that happy to see you," Fox responded from beside his boyfriend.

"Hey! No being mean. It's Christmas!" Dad chastised.

"Would it really be Christmas without those two biting each other's heads off?" Robin asked with a laugh.

Mom forced all of us into the kitchen to get plates of the Chinese takeout she ordered before going back to the living room for gifts and a movie. She already had mugs of hot chocolate for everyone waiting.

"Glad to see you listened to me," Raven said quietly, bumping her hip into mine.

I didn't want to be reminded of how I ran off to Raven's apartment just to get away when Landon left me. But I should have known she was going to remind me of that. I didn't say anything back to her.

My parents had turned the living room into the perfect spot for a movie night. They had the couches arranged around the TV and bean bag chairs and pillows on the floor for the rest of us who weren't going to fit on the couches. I sat down on the floor between Raven and Landon, the coffee table in front of us.

Landon seemed to be nervous with this many people, especially with most of them being my family. I brought my hand down on his thigh, giving him a reassuring squeeze.

He relaxed slightly even as Mom started passing around presents to everyone. He reluctantly took the gift from her and set it down in his lap.

"You can open it," I told him. "She's not going to make everyone go one by one and watch you."

"Oh," he said, seeming to relax. "Good."

Mom handed me my present and I immediately tore it open, hoping it would make Landon feel better about opening his.

"Matching blankets. How cute," I said after Landon opened his, realizing my parents had coordinated this gift for us. "Perfect for a movie night."

Landon grinned at me, rubbing his hands along the blanket to feel the softness.

About half way into the movie, I got up to get some water from the kitchen. I noticed Fox follow me in there, but I wouldn't say anything until he did. The two of us hadn't really spoken since he called me after James and Stella had messaged him. I didn't know what to say to him, but he clearly had something to say if he was following me in here.

"So, things are good with the two of you?" Fox asked me as I grabbed two glasses from the cabinet.

"Yes, more than good," I replied.

He nodded, leaning back against the counter as I filled the glasses with water.

"Look, Wren," Fox started with a sigh. "I may have overreacted on Thanksgiving weekend."

I snorted, turning to face him with a grin.

"May have?"

He glared at me, but it was short lived.

"I didn't know you cared so much about him," he said.

"It wouldn't have mattered if you did know," I pointed out. "Me caring about him would have had no impact whatsoever on how you reacted."

I was so scared of his reaction, so worried it would tarnish the relationship my brother and I worked so hard to build. Our relationship was fragile enough as it was, and maybe it was even more fragile than I thought it to be. Fox wouldn't even talk to me when he found out about Landon. It made me realize that the two of us treated each other badly. It wasn't just me, it was a two way street. I didn't think Fox realized that.

He couldn't even deny what I said. He knew I was right.

"I'm sorry for how you found out," I said, which seemed to surprise him. I wasn't one for apologies. "I'm not sorry for being with him."

"No, I know," Fox said, putting his hand behind his neck in discomfort and looking anywhere in the room but at me. "I guess, I... well."

Fox wasn't good at apologies either.

"Do you have something to say?" I asked him.

"I guess... I'm sorry," Fox finally spit out. It was like pulling teeth.

Our apologies hung in the air like neither of us knew what to do with them. I didn't think either of us really expected, or really wanted, an apology from the other and now neither of us knew what to do with it.

Luckily, we were saved by Ian coming into the room.

"Elijah's trying to cuddle with me," Ian said.

Fox rolled his eyes. "He's asleep."

"Still trying to cuddle with me," Ian replied, then turned to me. "Since when are you gay too?"

"Ian, always so pleasant," I said, grabbing the glasses of water from the counter and going back to the living room.

I set the glasses on the table in front of Landon and me and got back under the blanket the two of us were sharing. Landon smiled over at me and the two of us sat close for the rest of the movie.

***

Landon Reilly

Waking up on Christmas morning feeling excited was a new experience for me. I always knew what to expect from Christmas. We would eat breakfast, open gifts, go to church, have dinner, and the day was over. Sure, there were some years we got some really good gifts, but we were never allowed to play with them on Christmas.

There was one year I got an iPod, and I didn't get to use it for a whole week because every time I asked to use it, my father withheld it even longer.

At the Ridley household, I really didn't know what to expect, but it was already infinitely better than any Christmas I had at home just based on last night.

Wren was beside me, his leg thrown over my waist and his head resting on my shoulder. He stirred awake a moment later, rolling off of me to stretch.

"Merry Christmas," he said, his voice deeper and gravely from sleep, stretching his arms over his head.

"Merry Christmas," I responded.

"Breakfast is cooking," Wren said.

Now that he mentioned it, I could smell all sorts of things cooking from downstairs. I could hear the faint sound of sizzling on the stove.

"Should we go downstairs?" I asked.

"In a minute," Wren replied, lying back down.

"I sent a message to Livi last night," I told him. "She hasn't gotten back to me."

"I can text her too," he offered.

It might be easier that way since he could text directly to her phone while I could only send messages to that old iPod.

After a few more minutes in bed, Wren and I got up and went to the bathroom before going downstairs to breakfast.

Wren's youngest brother, Colt, was already sitting at the table with a plate of food in front of him when we got downstairs.

"I think I'm getting a laptop this year," he told Wren as we sat down with him.

"Oh, you do?" Wren asked him. "What makes you think that?"

"Dad's been hinting at it," Colt replied. "He's not good at keeping secrets. Plus I think he's given up on me playing any more sports, so I won't be getting more of that junk."

"Wait, you don't believe in Santa anymore?" Wren asked.

Colt shot him a displeased look.

"I'm thirteen, not three," he said.

"Fox believed in Santa until he was fifteen," Wren said, and I couldn't tell if he was lying just to be funny or if he was dead serious.

"Shut up," Fox snapped as he walked into the dining area with Elijah's and Ian behind him. "No, I didn't."

"It's okay if you did, Foxy," Elijah said, wrapping his arm around him. "It's cute."

" *I didn't,"* Fox repeated.

The rest of the family came into the dining area
and we all ate breakfast together, which was nice. This breakfast was full of all kinds of food and talking and laughter. Nothing like any other Christmas breakfast I'd ever had.

Then when we were done we went into the living room for a picture in front of the tree. Wren's mom kept readjusting everyone so we would all fit in the picture while Wren's dad propped his phone up on the couch before running back into the picture to make it before the time ran out. It took multiple takes, but he eventually got a picture he was satisfied with, and then it was time for the gifts.

I had put my presents for Wren under the Christmas tree last night. I felt nervous about him opening them, but it was too late now. Wren's parents had already started handing out the gifts.

Wren's sister, Fawn, had already torn open her first one and was squealing in excitement about some skincare stuff.

Then some gifts got placed in front of me, and I hesitated before picking one up. I started with a gift from Wren's parents. They had gotten me some typical stuff you'd get for someone you really didn't know that well, which I was grateful for anyway.

"I didn't know you'd gotten me something," Wren said, grabbing my attention. He was holding up the two gifts I had for him.

"It's nothing," I said. "I didn't really know what to get, but I didn't want to get nothing."

"Hm," Wren hummed, tearing open the wrapping paper. I wanted to look away, for some reason feeling uncomfortable with him opening my gifts.

He opened the first one up and revealed one of my hockey sweatshirts, one that he hadn't already taken.

"Oh, you know I love this," he said with a grin. "Thank you."

I nodded, waiting for him to open the other one.

The next gift was just in an envelope. Wren carefully opened it and revealed his next gift, the bookmarks I had gotten him with quotes from the audiobook we had been listening to together.

"I know you don't really use bookmarks, but I found these online-"

"I love them," Wren said, and he sounded serious. "They're perfect."

I let out a deep breath, relieved.

"Well," Wren started. "Aren't you going to open yours?"

I was less nervous about opening these gifts than I was for Wren opening mine, but I was still uncomfortable with the fact that he had spent money on me.

The first one I opened up was a physical copy of the audiobook we were listening to, *The Starless Sea.*

"You said it was hard to follow along with the audio sometimes, so I just got you the book in case you'd want to read along," Wren explained.

I smiled at him and reached for the next one, which was a puzzle.

"I like doing puzzles, so I figured we could do this one together," Wren said. "I find them to be quite calming.

"I could always use something calming," I told him with a laugh before grabbing the last one.

The last gift was a journal with some nice pens. I looked up at Wren, who looked a little sheepish.

"I journal sometimes," he admitted. "It can be a great tool to let some emotions out."

I smiled at him and pulled him into a hug.

"Thank you, Wren," I said. "I love it."

He seemed relieved, and it felt good to know that I wasn't the only one nervous about giving gifts. Wren leaned in and kissed my cheek.

Later on, we finally got to go pick up Livi, even only for a brief amount of time.

"Merry Christmas!" she exclaimed, getting into Wren's car. "I've missed you."

"Merry Christmas," I replied. "I've missed you too."

"Hello, Olivia," Wren greeted.

Livi chuckled. "Hello, Wren."

Livi spent the next few minutes catching me up on her life. She was dating Jimmy Murphy for real now. One of her friends hated him, so the two of them were having issues. She was doing good in all her classes and doing well with driving.

"Oh! And I have a skating competition coming up soon in Providence!" she excitedly exclaimed. "Will you *please* come? Please?"

"Yeah, of course," I promised her. "Just let me know when. As long as I don't have a game, I'll be there."

We spent a little while longer with Livi, and I hugged her before she left, promising we would start seeing each other more often.

When Wren and I went to sleep that night I had a smile on my face, knowing this was the best Christmas I'd ever had.

**

Merry Christmas!!

45

Wren Ridley

With Christmas having come and gone, and the new year upon us, Landon had to move back to the dorms to continue his hockey season. We hadn't really talked about what *we'd* be doing during that time while I couldn't move back into my dorm for another three weeks.

During that first week, I drove down to New York to watch one of Landon's games, which also turned into a visit with James who insisted on showing me around the city in the freezing cold.

"If you make us late for Landon's game, I'm going to kill you in your sleep," I told him as it got later in the day.

"We're not going to be late, chill out," James assured me.

We weren't late, but we cut it close which irritated me and James knew it. He insisted on bothering me the whole time and distracting me from watching Landon.

I had never cared much for hockey, but I loved seeing Landon on the ice. He was in his element out there, looking confident and poised and elegant. James yapping in my ear the whole time was not a welcome distraction.

After spending an entire day with James, I was glad for the almost four hour drive back home to be alone and listen to my book the whole way. I couldn't even complain about the traffic because it wasn't like I had anything to do or anywhere to be. I got about half way through an audiobook in the amount of time it took me to drive back.

By the second week, I had basically moved into Landon's dorm room. Neither of us would say it, but we were both quite attached to each other. It was bordering on clingy, but I couldn't find it in me to care. I had never had

such a connection with someone that made me want to be with them all the time, and I could tell that it was the same for him.

Even though at times Landon was acting a little strange, it was clear that he wanted me to be there. I couldn't tell if the times he acted strange was because of our situation, the way we were so caught up in each other that at times it was a bit overwhelming, or if it was something else like that asshole on his hockey team starting something with him again.

Either way, I tried my best not to point it out so to not upset him. But at times, I couldn't hold it in. And of course, he would brush me off and tell me it was nothing, then kiss my face and make me forget that I ever had a concern at all.

When Landon was gone for hockey practice or games, I had to keep myself busy which was good for the writer in me, but also left me extremely bored. I continued writing and read over my own words hundreds of times to the point where it didn't even feel like I had written what I was reading.

One day Landon came back while I was doing this and I didn't even notice until he stood right behind me, placing his hands on my shoulders.

"What are you working on?" he asked, leaning down to kiss my head.

"Nothing of substance," I muttered, closing out the page I had been staring at for probably close to an hour.

"Are you ever going to tell me about it?" Landon asked, backing away from me to lean against his bed.

I turned to face him, closing my laptop.

"If it ever has a chance of getting published, then yes."

"So it's a book?"

"It's trying to be," I replied, getting up to stand in front of him

"Would you let me read it?" Landon asked, his hands finding their way to my waist. Lately, our hands always seemed to find their way to the other person like they were magnetic. I couldn't say I minded it. I liked Landon's hands on me.

I shook my head at him with a small smile forming on my lips.

"You don't even like to read," I reminded him.

"I do now, sort of," he said, moving his hands up and down on me. "I would like it if it was written by you."

"You don't have to flatter me," I said. "I'll get you off if you just ask."

Landon scoffed and shoved me away lightly.

"Do you have to be so crude?"

I feigned surprise. "When did you learn that word?"

Landon rolled his eyes at me and went over to his closet to change his clothes. He threw what he was previously wearing into the hamper and grabbed the hamper after changing into something else.

"I'm going to throw this laundry in," he told me as he went to the door.

"I put some of my things in there as well," I said, grinning at his look of fake annoyance.

When Landon left the room, I looked back at my closed laptop. I didn't know if I'd let anyone read my work, let alone Landon. While the ultimate goal was to get my work published, I didn't even know if that was a possibility or if I would even use my own name to publish it or use a pseudonym.

What I was writing was fiction, but it was semi-autobiographical. *I* was one of the characters. Not by name, but I wrote myself into him without really realizing it at first. And I had gotten too far along before I did realize it. We shared a personality, experiences, mannerisms, thoughts, insecurities, fears.

So what was originally supposed to be a sort of campus novel, a satirical yet dark look into life in academia and the university as an institution, turned deeply personal.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to put it out as an anonymous person and let others read it without really knowing me. But to let Landon read my work would be a different story.

Landon came back into the room a few moments later and the two of us got into bed together.

"I think I'm going to go to Livi's skating competition," Landon said as he raked his hand through my hair, my head on his chest. "Alone."

I picked my head up and looked at him with an incredulous expression.

"I'll go with you," I offered, not liking the idea of him going there alone, of the possibility of him running into his parents while he was by himself.

The two of us had talked about it briefly after Livi initially asked him to go, agreeing that it would be risky, but that was all that was said. How he went from apprehension to going alone was beyond me.

"I don't want you to have to see my dad if I end up running into him," Landon explained.

I sat up more. "That's exactly why I should be there. In case you see him."

I didn't like that he was trying to push me out and keep me on the sidelines when I should be by his side. Landon didn't tell me much about his father, but I knew enough that seeing him would be bad for Landon emotionally, mentally, maybe even physically.

"I don't want that though, Wren," Landon argued. "I don't want you to see him. I don't want him to even look at you!"

"It is entirely out of the question that I let you go on your own," I said, sitting up straighter so Landon was no longer touching me. "So let's not even argue about it."

I knew my words would only irritate him. It seemed that even if I was trying to diffuse a situation, I had a way of making him angry. Maybe it was my tone or just the way I said things. Or maybe he was just always ready to be defensive.

Landon didn't say anything for a moment, just letting his glare linger on me as if trying to make me give in. We both knew who had the stronger will.

Landon sighed and pulled me back down with him.

"Why do you have to make everything so difficult?" he asked, pulling me against his chest. "You always have to be such a pain."

What he was saying wasn't a compliment, but he still said it with a hint of fondness like what he was saying was true but he wouldn't have it any other way.

"I'm naturally argumentative," I said. And extremely protective of him, it seemed.

"And naturally infuriating."

"Well, I didn't make you angry enough to throw a punch, so I can't be *that* infuriating," I joked.

Landon didn't seem to find it funny. I suppose that was a sore subject for him.

"Just don't try to provoke my father if we see him," Landon said with a sigh. "He's... he's not a good guy. And I don't know what he'll do."

"I kind of figured he's not a good guy," I replied, part of me hoping that Landon would elaborate.

He hadn't told me much about his upbringing, but it didn't take a genius to figure out that it wasn't good. I had already decided that Landon's father was an evil man and should be punished eternally in hell for whatever he did to him.

"He's good at faking," Landon said. "He can keep up appearances, but at home, it was a different story. He made me work so hard because he had a dream for me. He wanted to live vicariously through me, so I had to be exactly as he wanted. His perfect Christian son."

"So, what is it, he couldn't achieve what he wanted with his life, so he had you to do it for him?" I asked.

It seemed like a case of a father whose dreams were shattered so he expected his son to realize them for him, even if they didn't share the same dream. It was like he viewed Landon as an extension of him rather than as his own person.

"Pretty much," Landon responded. "I had to play hockey. It was never my choice. Livi has to figure skate. Because that's what our parents did. We were basically born just to be younger versions of them, to live so that they could relive their glory days."

It made me angry on behalf of him to hear him say that. It was like so much of his youth was stolen from him because his father wanted him to be his puppet instead of his child.

"My dad controlled everything," Landon continued. "He obsessively controlled my diet. He barely let me hang out with my friends. He made me work out so hard that I threw up. My mom controls Livi like that. In a different way, but still."

"Then why would you want to face him on your own?"

"Because I'm... I'm embarrassed, Wren," Landon admitted, tightening his hold on me. "My father wants me dead, or he wishes I was never born. I have no idea what he would say or do if we saw him, but I do know that I don't want you to see that."

I physically recoiled at the thought of Landon's father wanting him dead because now I was at the point where I couldn't imagine a world without him.

"He said that?" I asked.

"Apparently," Landon said, a humorless chuckle falling from his lips. "I ran into one of my old teammates while we were skating and he told me that my father tells people that I'm dead. It kind of checks out since he wishes that was true."

That was probably why he had been acting weird. He had been dealing with that on his own. Seeing an old teammate, getting told his own father wants him dead, it had to take a toll on him.

"My father hates me because I'm not exactly as he wanted me to be," Landon continued. "He basically forced me to come out to him. He already knew I was gay, he knew it for a long time, but eventually he just made me say it to his face, so I did. And then he stood up at church and told *everyone* that he needed help for his gay son because he didn't know what to do anymore. He didn't care that everyone I went to school with was there and he didn't care about what being outed could do to me. He wanted me to be hurt, to be forced into being straight. So he was going to send me off to conversion therapy with Elijah and his stepdad. I think he knew it wouldn't do anything. He just wanted to get rid of me."

I started to feel sick at the thought of Landon being treated that way, the thought of him being scared of what would happen to him, of him being sad and alone and humiliated. I wished I could go back in time and protect him from that, to go back and pull him out of that church, to hold him close to me and bring him home. If only things could have been different, if I could have met him sooner.

"Your father is a cold hearted man who doesn't even deserve to breathe the same air as you," I told him in a low voice. "If he sees you at Olivia's competition, he should know to keep walking because he doesn't deserve to even speak to you."

The two of us had accepted that if we went to this competition, we would see this man. It was just how the universe worked. The one person you didn't want to see would always show up.

"I still hear his voice sometimes in my head," Landon admitted after a few moments, his hand stroking my side lightly. "Therapy has helped a lot with that, but sometimes I can't block him out. I hear him calling me disgusting and worthless. Sometimes I believe him."

I grabbed onto Landon's hand and squeezed it tightly in my own as if I could take all his pain away through touch alone.

"You are neither of those things, darling," I murmured, kissing his collarbone then up to his neck and jaw. "You are so wonderful it's nauseating, but not at all disgusting."

Landon gave me a real laugh at that, and I smiled against his skin.

"You could have told me about the old teammate when it happened," I told him, making circles on his chest with my finger.

"I didn't want to ruin our date," he said. "I was trying to keep my cool about it. And I didn't want you doing anything insane."

"Insane like what?"

"Like letting a bunch of bugs loose in his house or something."

"Well, I wouldn't reuse my ideas like that," I said, which caused him to let out an adorable snort. "I would have had to figure something else out."

"Something even more insane?" he asked.

"It would depend on what he did," I replied.

Landon shook his head at me. "You're crazy."

"Yes, yes I know," I said. "You've used that one before. Same with infuriating."

"I don't have as big of a vocabulary as you."

I chuckled at that and closed my eyes, cozying up against him. My rest didn't last long because Landon eventually had to go change the laundry over, and when he got up, I no longer wanted to lie down. I grabbed my book that was laying on the nightstand and opened up the page the bookmark Landon had gotten for me was holding.

Usually, I would just remember the page I was on without a problem, but I liked that this came from him. I liked how thoughtful it was and how it would always remind me of him whenever I saw it.

Landon came back to the room after switching over the laundry and got back into bed with me, leaning his head on my shoulder as I read as if he was reading the words with me. I knew that he wasn't, but it still felt like we were doing this together.

After all that he said today, I somehow felt closer to him, like I could understand him better than before. But I always felt that I was understanding him more and more all the time. It was like any time he spoke I felt even closer to him.

I tried not to let that scare me, but it did anyway.

**

Thank you for reading!! leave your thoughts

46

Landon Reilly

From: Unknown
landon it's livi. happy birthday!!! i hope i see you today<3

I had nearly forgotten about my birthday until I opened that text from Livi. I was so caught up with worry about what would happen at her skating competition today that it had slipped my mind. It wasn't like I had ever done much celebrating for my birthdays. My parents had thrown me parties in the past, but it was all just a front for everyone we knew. I never cared much for birthdays.

Wren was sitting at my desk, typing away on his laptop when I rolled over in bed to look at him. He was already dressed and presentable like he had been up for hours, though I knew he hadn't been. I had woken up briefly when he had gotten out of bed, craving the warmth of his body against mine.

I watched him for a moment, then he turned like he felt my eyes on him.

"You didn't tell me it's your birthday," he said. He said it in such a casual way that I couldn't tell if it had even bothered him or if he was just pointing it out.

"How do you even know that?"

"Olivia," he replied, which was all the explanation needed.

I let out a sigh. I had forgotten that the two of them talked to each other.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Wren asked.

"Because it's not a big deal," I replied, getting out of bed and walking toward my closet.

"I could have gotten you something if I'd known."

"I don't want you to get me anything," I said, pulling a shirt out of the closet. "I don't even know when your birthday is. It's not like we've talked about it."

"It's May 29th," he said. "You know, we could celebrate today instead of going to that competition. I'm sure Olivia would understand."

I shot him a deadpanned look then threw on my shirt.

"You think you're going to outsmart me and make me think that I don't want to go," I started. "But it's not going to work, so you might as well stop trying."

"That's not what I was trying to do at all," Wren lied.

I knew him better than that. Wren had made it very clear that he didn't want me going to Livi's competition. Wren was good at making his opinions known. What he wasn't good at was being subtle.

It sort of warmed my heart that he wanted to protect me from seeing my father. I had never really had anyone care about me in such a way, but it felt nice. It made me want to hold onto him, squeezing him tightly to physically show my appreciation for him. But his insistence could also be annoying, especially with the way he tried to outsmart me any chance he got.

I wanted to support my sister, even if it meant putting myself in a bad situation. It was probably the guilt that made me so insistent on showing up for Livi. I was guilty because I hadn't been around much lately, hadn't talked to her much. I was also guilty because I hadn't been to one of her competitions in over a year, and she specifically asked me to be at this one. I couldn't say no to her even if I wanted to.

"You can stay here if you don't want to go," I suggested, knowing he wouldn't agree to that. Sometimes I just liked to argue with him a little.

Wren shook his head at me with expression that told me he thought I was being crazy.

"Let's start getting ready then so we can grab breakfast beforehand," Wren said, standing from the desk as I finished getting dressed. I did my morning routine, then the two of us got into Wren's car to go get breakfast.

Part of me couldn't stomach the thought of food. I was so anxious about today that I felt nauseous. Seeing Wren eat his own food without a care in the world made me feel slightly better, so I followed his lead. He probably wouldn't have let me leave here without eating something anyway.

When we got in the car to head over to the arena, Wren placed his hand on my thigh. I hadn't even noticed I had been shaking my leg until his hand stilled me. Wren surprisingly didn't say anything about my anxiety.

"Do you know when Olivia will be on?" Wren asked as we drove down the road.

"I'm not sure," I told him, looking out the window as we neared the arena. "She does a short program and a free program."

I hadn't been to one of her competitions in a while, and it wasn't like my father brought me to many of them either. A lot of the time it was my mother who brought Livi to skating and my father who brought me to hockey. Needless to say, I wasn't well-versed in figure skating.

Wren parked the car, but left it running as he turned to me.

"We still have time to leave," Wren said with a grin.

I shot him an irritated look and got out of the car. Wren was quick to follow me and the two of us made our way inside.

There were more people here than I thought there would be, and that actually gave me some comfort. The more people there were, the less likely it was that I would run into my parents.

Wren walked beside me, clearly at ease. His walk was like a glide, his head held high. I looked at him and wished that I could be more like him. He caught me looking out of the corner of his eye and shot me a smile.

"A lot of people here," he commented.

"Probably a good thing," I responded.

I wanted him to hold my hand, but at the same time I wanted him to keep his distance. I craved his comfort while also wanting to keep him at arms length.

The two of us didn't say much as we found our way to our seats. I looked around before sitting down, but I didn't see my parents anywhere. They were probably closer to the front, ensuring the best view to catch all of Livi's mistakes. It was exactly how my father would always watch me play hockey, with a scrutinizing gaze instead of one of pride or admiration.

"I don't know much about figure skating," Wren said, bringing my attention to him. "How do we know if she's doing well?"

"Basically if she's nailing her jumps and spins and sticking the landings then she's doing good," I said. "I don't know much about it either. I've never really gotten to watch her that much."

Wren nodded, and a few moments later the first skater took to the ice. Neither of us cared much for watching the other skaters, but Wren watched the first short program while I watched him watch it.

"It's so cold in here," Wren said, clapping after the skater finished.

"Well, yeah," I said. "It's an ice rink."

"They can't make it warmer for the spectators?" he asked and I just shook my head at him.

We sat through a few more performances before it was Livi's turn. When I heard her name, I sat on the edge of my seat, my eyes glued to the rink.

Livi skated to her starting mark and began her program. All was going well at first. She skated with elegance and precision. It was the last jump that ruined her nearly perfect performance.

When she came down to land, her ankle shifted beneath her and sent her down on the ice. Livi got right back up and struck her final mark with a wide smile. I couldn't help but smile down at her.

I felt pride well in my chest. Even though she messed up, she got right back up and finished. That was a quality of a true competitor.

"Do you think she's alright?" Wren asked me as we both clapped at the end of her performance. My heart warmed in my chest at the fact that he sounded genuinely concerned for my little sister.

"I'm sure she's fine," I told him as I watched her skate off the ice. It didn't look like she was favoring one leg over the other. Our mother was probably pissed, but I knew Livi could handle her.

After the next skater, I left Wren to go to the bathroom and grab us drinks. As I finished in the bathroom and came out, I was suddenly standing face to face with my father.

I knew of the possibility of this happening when I came here, but that still didn't prepare me for the tightness in my chest just at the sight of him. The last time I had seen him, it had sent me into a spiral and he hadn't even looked at me. This time, he was staring right at me and it felt like I was about to fall over.

No matter how much I thought I could handle being face to face with him, nothing could have prepared me for it. It was still like I was just thrown to the wolves. It was like I was a speck that he could just walk on. I was minuscule and he had me under a magnifying glass. I felt helpless and weak in his presence.

"Landon," he said in a low tone. I had heard him say my name that way so many times. It was disappointment and anger.

I didn't say anything back. I couldn't. All I wanted was to walk away from him and back to Wren, but I was frozen in place.

"You shouldn't be here," he said. "You shouldn't be speaking to my daughter at all. You've distracted her and she tanked her performance all because of *you* ."

"I-" I started, but he quickly cut me off.

" *You* are to cut all contact with my daughter," he snapped, moving in closer and making me feel smaller. "I have my ways of finding these things out, so I *will* know if you continue speaking to her."

I wanted to argue with him, to show him that he didn't scare me or have any affect on me, but I couldn't. Because it wasn't true and I couldn't even fake it.

"You've really let yourself go," he said, looking me up and down. "I've caught a few of your games on TV out of curiosity and it's not surprising that you've become sloppy. You're a failure because you lack discipline, and I will not allow you to rub off on my daughter. She has a future. She is a good girl. She doesn't need your influence on her."

"She doesn't know I'm here," I said, my voice weak, trying to protect Livi in any way that I could.

"Don't lie to me," he snapped. "I know that she does. I know that you two have kept in contact. Trust me when I say you will not like the consequences if you don't cut all contact with her."

My heart was beating fast, my breaths becoming shallow.

"As far as I'm concerned, Olivia is an only child," he continued. "You think that because you're no longer part of this family that you can do as you please, but I will make your life hell if you continue interfering. Do you understand? You are a worthless, disgusting failure and I will not let you drag my daughter down with you."

Every nasty thing he had ever said to me started flooding my brain. Every horrible thing he had ever done to me played on a loop. I knew he would follow through on his threats if given the chance.

"Landon?"

I looked over my father's shoulder to see my mother standing behind him. She looked at me with sad, wide, teary eyes. It almost felt like she missed me and that she was overcome with emotion at the sight of me. I almost walked past my father to go to her. Then I remembered her complacency. I remembered how she let my father abuse me. I remembered how she treated Livi.

My mother was always the kinder of my parents. Rather, I used to think of her as kind but now knew that she didn't have a kind bone in her body. She let my father do as he pleased to me. She never protected me.

I almost forgot that when I looked at her though. I wished I could walk over to her and let her take me into her arms. I remembered times when I prayed for my parents' love, times when I asked God why my parents didn't love me. My life would have been so different if my parents just loved me.

"I have to go," I muttered, mustering up the strength to speak.

"Leave this place. Now," my father said in a familiar voice of authority.

I staggered past him, walking by my mother without a glance, though I could feel her eyes on me as I left. I left through the exit doors and went down the stairs until I reached the outside. I took in deep breaths, finally no longer feeling like I was being suffocated.

I didn't know how long I was out there, but eventually, Wren found me. I was still breathing heavy when he came outside. His hand on my shoulder startled me and I jumped back then relaxed when I saw it was him.

"What happened?" Wren asked, his face serious and full of concern.

"Go. Now," I breathed out.

Wren wrapped his arm around me and directed me to his car. He helped me into the passenger's seat, but he stayed there standing outside the car in front of me instead of moving to the driver's side.

"Landon," he said, putting his hands on my shoulders. "Calm down, okay? Breathe slowly."

We looked into each others eyes and I tried to match Wren's breathing.

"Better," Wren said, bringing his hand up to my face to push my hair off my forehead. "Let's go."

Wren kissed my forehead then backed away, shutting the door and moving around to the driver's seat. We were mostly quiet on the way back to my dorm, Wren placing a comforting hand on my thigh, moving it up and down.

When we got back to my dorm, Wren brought me into the bathroom and started the shower. I was confused but I didn't question him.

"Come on," he said, gesturing toward the shower. "You're sweaty. You need to get in."

Without thinking, I listened to him and got undressed and into the shower. A moment later, Wren followed me. Normally, I would yell at him or push him out, but I wanted him near me even though I was embarrassed. I didn't want to snap at him. I wanted his comfort, welcomed it.

Wren pushed his hands through my hair as the water cascaded over me. I let him put my shampoo in, his fingers kneading my scalp. After he rinsed it out, I stepped forward and insta his embrace, letting my face fall between his neck and shoulder. Wren held me, one hand on the back of my head and the other on my back.

"Was it your father?" Wren asked quietly against my ear. "Did you see him?"

"Are you going to say 'I told you so'?" I asked, feeling embarrassed.

Wren hummed. "No."

"Why not? You were right," I said. "I saw him and I couldn't handle it."

"While I do enjoy hearing 'you're right' come from your mouth, I'm not glad to be right about this," he said.

"You're glad to be right about everything else," I muttered.

"Your pain doesn't bring me happiness."

I shuddered, overwhelmed with emotions. I wanted to squeeze him and hold onto him forever. I wanted him to always be whispering in my ear, playing with my hair, rubbing circles on my back. I wanted him in my life always.

Then it hit me.

I love him.

I pulled away slightly so I could look at his face, my eyes wide.

Wren smiled slightly at me, bringing his hands up to rest on my cheeks, moving his thumbs under my eyes.

"I knew you'd eventually let me in the shower with you," he said, his grin widening.

I love him.

"You didn't really give me a choice," I said, my voice low. I was still reeling at my realization, the force of it weighing on me.

"If you didn't want me in here, you would have pushed me out," he said.

I leaned forward and kissed his grinning mouth, slowly and carefully like it was my first time. He responded slowly, letting me take the lead. We stayed like that in the shower until the water started getting cold. Then we ran back to my room and Wren wrapped a towel around me before kissing my neck

and jaw. He lowered himself in front of me then looked up at me with a smirk.

"I think you deserve some birthday action," Wren said.

My heart fluttered even with him being so crude. He moved the towel out of the way and put his mouth on me. Even then, I could only think of one thing.

I love him.

**

Thanks for reading! Leave your thoughts.

47

Wren Ridley

Landon had been acting strange ever since the day he saw his father at the tournament a few days ago. I couldn't really blame him for that, but I would have been lying if I said that his actions weren't perplexing.

Sometimes I would catch him just staring at me with this strange look that was half affectionate and half panicked. He was acting almost shy around me at times, turning away from me when he caught me looking at him, seeming to be embarrassed or bashful with my eyes on him.

Of course, I tried to distract him with other things, namely my body. I was trying to get him to try new things in bed like holding my wrists down or putting his hands on my neck. He did those things, nervously, but still did them when I asked, mostly.

"I'm not doing that," Landon said, stopping in the middle of fucking me and looking at me like I had two heads.

"Why not?"

"Wren, I'm not... smacking you," he said. His face was so red, but I couldn't tell if it was from embarrassment or from what we were doing.

"I like it," I assured him, pulling my knees up and wrapping my legs around him to urge him to keep going.

He let out a huff and continued.

"Of course, you do," he muttered, his breath picking up.

I dug my nails into his back as each thrust brought me closer and closer to the edge. Landon reached between us and started stroking me, which meant that he was getting close and wanted to get me there too.

Landon brought his mouth down to my chest, kissing and sucking on my skin and over to my nipple. I was blissed out, and a few moments later, my eyes fluttered as I finished. Landon groaned as he pounded into me and finished himself a few moments later. He stayed on top of me, looking down at me with a soft expression before bringing his hand to my cheek and kissing me tenderly on the lips.

Landon rolled over to lie beside me.

"It's gonna suck when our roommates come back," he said after a few moments.

It was only a matter of days until everyone would be coming back to school, and our days of privacy were over.

"Why, because we won't be able to have sex every day?" I asked, teasing him in hopes of making him blush like he always did.

Landon rolled his eyes and lightly kicked my ankle.

"No, because it will be hard for us to ever be alone," he said.

"We'll find time," I assured him, turning onto my side and resting my hand on his bare chest.

I tapped patterns onto his chest, just enjoying being close to him, enjoying his touch.

"I talked to Livi," Landon muttered after a moment, his arm thrown over his face. "I told her what happened at the competition and how we have to be even more careful now when we talk."

"Yeah? What did she say?"

"She was upset," Landon said. "I had to convince her not to confront him. It'll only make it worse."

I hummed in agreement. My heart ached for him. Landon cared for his sister so much, and I knew all of this was weighing heavily on him. Just the

thought of not being able to get in contact with her was stressing him out and there was pretty much nothing I could do to make any of this better for him.

He didn't want to talk much about his father, even though he was clearly in distress when he saw him. He hadn't told me much of what was said, only that his father didn't want him having any contact with Olivia. I could imagine the things he said were eating at Landon, and that he struggled in his mind to cast the words away. He admitted he sometimes believed the horrible things his father would say to him, that it was hard to see them as anything other than the truth.

"I've been thinking..." Landon trailed, removing his arm from his face and staring up at the ceiling.

"Thinking about what?" I asked. I held off from teasing him because he seemed so serious.

"I'm not sure I want to play hockey anymore," he admitted. The way he said it made me think that he thought it was a crazy thought, that I would try to convince him of how much he loved the sport and encourage him to keep with it. If that was the reaction he wanted, it wasn't the one he was going to get.

"Maybe you shouldn't," I said. Landon turned to look at me.

"It's not like I can just quit, Wren," he responded, looking a little frustrated. "I have a scholarship. I can't afford *not* to play if I want to stay in school. Which I do."

"There are other ways you can get scholarships and pay for school," I told him. "How do you think everyone else does it?"

"Rich parents?"

"Not everyone here, or even at Brown, has rich parents. Some people are paying their own way."

"It seems impossible," he mumbled, turning to rest his head on my shoulder.

"It's not," I assured him. "I'll help you. We can figure it out."

Within the next few days, both of our roommates were back, meaning I had to move back into my dorm. Landon's roommate, Kyle, walked in while the two of us were in bed, luckily clothed, and when I checked my phone I had a text from James telling me he was back in the room.

It was going to be strange sleeping on my own now that I had spent most nights of the last month sleeping beside Landon, but it was something I was going to have to get used to. It was probably going to be good for me anyway. I was getting too used to being with him all the time, too clingy. I wasn't used to being so attached, so some separation would be good for me.

That was what I thought at least until I got back to the room with James and was already so fed up with him I was ready to lock him out of the room.

"What do you *mean* you don't want to go out, watch me get drunk, and drive me home later?" James whined after I told him I wasn't going to go out with him to the bar tonight.

"I mean exactly that," I told him. "Go ask somebody else. I'm sure Anthony is around by now."

James narrowed his eyes at me and threw one of his pillows across the room, attempting to hit me. He missed.

"Stop being a little asshole and invite your little boyfriend to go to the bar with us," James retorted.

I was about to decline again, but I stopped myself. We hadn't really done anything for Landon's birthday, and he was undoubtedly down in the dumps about seeing his father. And now he was contemplating detailing his entire life by quitting hockey. Maybe going out would be a good thing for him. He could feel celebrated and take his mind off of everything else.

"You know what, that's a great idea," I told James. "I'll take Landon out tonight."

"And me," he added. "You're taking me too."

"Oh, I never said you could come with us."

"Come on, Wren," James whined. "Don't make me beg. I will if I have to, but I'd prefer not."

"You don't need to me third wheeling," I replied.

James shrugged. "I don't mind. I'm going to get ready. *Don't leave without me* ."

He made a motion with his fingers like he was keeping his eyes on me before leaving the room to take a shower.

I took this time to send Landon a text.

To: Landon
Would you like to go out tonight?

From: Landon
sure where?

To: Landon
I figured we could go to the bar to celebrate your birthday since we never had the chance. Fair warning: James wants to come.

From: Landon
that's fine i'm sure jess will too

And so later on in the night, I picked up Landon from his dorm, forcing James into the back seat, and we met up with Jess and Stella at the bar.

"You're really going to make me sit in the back seat?" James asked, opening the car door as Landon was making his way out of the building.

"Obviously," I replied with an eye roll, watching Landon as he walked toward the car.

He had his hair swept back like it was still wet from a shower and easy to push into place. He wore an all black attire, black jeans and a tight black tank top with a black button up left open over it. Landon looked so good that I hated the fact James would be in the car with us.

James whistled as Landon got closer and I turned to fix a glare on him.

"What? Your boyfriend is sexy," James said with a cunning grin.

"Shouldn't you only have eyes for Anthony?" I snapped.

"I *do* ," James assured me. "That doesn't mean I can't appreciate a good view."

"That's quite literally what it means."

James rolled his eyes. "Lighten up. The only one I'm going to be looking at tonight is Anthony."

"Is that why you wanted to go out so bad tonight?" I asked him. "Because you're stalking Anthony again?"

" *No* . I told him where I'll be. I'm sure he'll show."

"For your sake, I hope he does," I said. "Otherwise this will be incredibly embarrassing for you."

Landon got into the passenger's seat after that, leaning over to kiss me before turning back to look at James.

"Do whatever it is you two do in the car," James said, holding his hands up in mock surrender. "Pretend I'm not even here. I'd be happy just watching."

Landon turned around with a sour look on his face.

"Ignore him, darling, he's sexually frustrated at the moment," I said, putting the car in drive.

"Hey, I never-" James started, leaning forward to stick his face in the space between Landon and me.

"We're pretending you're not here, so be quiet," I snapped, cutting him off. "And sit back and put your seatbelt on."

"Fine, *Dad* ," James replied with a scoff, obliging my request.

Neither Landon or I decided to comment on James's choice of words, and he was luckily quiet for the rest of the ride to the bar. I was speculating that he was nervous about whether or not Anthony would show, but I didn't say anything about it, because if I did, he wouldn't be quiet anymore.

The area around the bar was crowded when we arrived and I had to circle around a few times to find parking, but eventually I parked the car and the three of us made our way inside.

James instantly went up to the bar with his fake I.D. in hand and ordered himself a drink while Landon and I tried to find a table.

"Why's it so packed?" Landon asked, shouting over the music.

I shrugged, scanning the area to see if I could find Jess or Stella.

It wasn't like this was the most popular bar in the city, but it was the most popular gay bar. With a lot of the college kids coming back from winter break, it made sense that the bars would be packed.

My eyes eventually caught sight of Stella and Jess standing near a high top on the other side of the room. I grabbed onto Landon's hand and led him over to the girls.

Jess was the first one to see us and her eyes immediately lit up at the sight of Landon. She threw herself into his arms and let out a squeal of excitement. He was a little stunned at first, looking unsure of what to do, but after a few moments he smiled and wrapped his arms around her.

"I bet your winter break was exciting," Stella commented with a sly smile, bumping her shoulder with mine.

"It was... fine," I said, suddenly feeling strange about divulging any information about what Landon and I did all break. It wasn't that I was embarrassed that I spent all my time with him and felt myself getting clingy and codependent, it was that letting other people know that made me feel a little pathetic.

"I bet yours was better than mine," she replied. "I couldn't wait for it to end so I could get out of there."

She couldn't wait for break to end while I was silently begging for time to slow so that it wouldn't end too soon. That was how I knew I was getting too clingy. I liked school. School, namely learning, was always such a big part of my identity. And I wanted to push it off just to spend some extra time with Landon, which wouldn't seem abnormal to other people, but it was abnormal for me.

A few moments later, James came over with a round of shots for everyone. Landon looked a little skeptical about drinking, and looked to me as if asking for permission.

"It's your night," I said in his ear, wrapping an arm around his waist and pulling him closer to me. "Have fun. I'll take care of you if you get drunk."

Landon smiled at me and took the shot. When I declined mine, James was more than happy to take it for me.

James kept bringing rounds of shots over, and eventually brought me a glass of water. Jess was talking Landon's ear off the whole time, and even though he had his arm lazily wrapped around my shoulder, leaning into me as she spoke, I still felt like he was too far away.

I put my hand on Landon's chest and brought my mouth to his ear.

"Let's go dance," I said, letting my lips brush against his skin.

Landon finally brought his attention away from Jess and looked at me. His eyes were slightly glossy, so I could tell the alcohol was getting to him and he was slowly slipping away.

"Yeah," he said, putting his glass of whatever James had brought over down on the table in front of us. "Yeah, okay."

Landon led me out onto the dance floor, looking back at me every so often as if to check that I was still following him even though he had my hand in his. Some remix of a pop song was playing and there were so many people around us that the temperature in this place felt like it went up at least twenty degrees.

I tugged on Landon's hand, bringing him to a stop, and brought my hand onto his hip to pull him closer before starting to move and sway to the music. Landon was a little more shy about dancing than I was, but I had seen firsthand how good he was when he had a few drinks in him.

"Come on, Landon, dance for me," I said with a grin.

Landon looked me up and down with an intense stare before spinning me around and pulling me up against him. He gripped my hips, holding me against his front. We stood still there for a moment before Landon started moving us together, grinding against me. I moved along with him, following his lead. I turned my head and brought my hand around to pull his face to mine, bringing our lips together. This kiss was all tongue and panting into each other's mouths. It was nothing like the last kiss we shared in public. This one was rough and sexual.

After that song, Landon got another drink from James, and I could tell he wasn't just a little tipsy. Landon was drunk. His movements were more fluid and less intentional. He swayed when he walked toward me and then he started moving to the music and I was transported back to the first time I saw him dancing.

He moved his hips and mouthed the words. His hands moved down his body in a slow, sensual motion. It was like he knew exactly what would get

me going, what would make me want to take him home right away and forget about the others for the night.

I realized I was just standing there, watching Landon's movements, and walked over to him. His hands reached out for me and the two of us danced together again.

At some point I had seen James dancing with Anthony, the latter looking ecstatic to be here.

Later on, when Landon was leaning on me and having me support all of his weight, James found us.

"I have to take him home," I told James, who was fairing a little better than Landon, but not much.

"I came here to tell you, I'm going back to Anthony's!" James slurred with a grin. "Isn't that great?"

"Where is he?"

Just then, Anthony walked up behind James, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"I'll take him," Anthony assured me. "I haven't been drinking."

I took Landon out to the car after that. He had his hands all over me, rubbing my chest, pinching my ass. I could only chuckle as he murmured words against my neck.

"We're going back to my place and you're going to sleep," I told him as I placed him down in the passenger's seat.

"Whyyy?" Landon whined.

I pushed his shoulder back gently so that he was leaning back in the seat, and then I pulled the seatbelt over his body and secured it into place.

"Because you need rest," I said before closing the door and going over to the driver's side.

It was a bit of a process getting him up to my dorm room when I had to support all of his weight. The RA at the entrance told me to get him upstairs before he puked so she wouldn't have to report anything, so I hauled him up the stairs.

Once we were in my room I got him ready for bed, taking his jeans off along with the over shirt he had on. Then I helped him into bed and got myself ready.

Landon appeared to already be asleep by the time I climbed into bed with him, but as I got comfortable, I heard him saying something.

"...love you," he muttered.

I stopped breathing for a moment, my mind reeling about whether or not I heard him correctly. I decided I hadn't heard him correctly. He was just speaking nonsense.

But then he said it again, more clearly this time.

"I love you, Wren."

And my stomach dropped.

**

Thanks for reading, leave your thoughts :)

48

Landon Reilly

When I woke in Wren's bed the next day, I was alone. It felt strange being in his bed without him there, like I was an intruder or I was being left behind somewhere unfamiliar. The bed was cold like he hadn't been there for a while and I suddenly felt cold at the thought of that.

Just as I sat up, the door opened and Wren walked in wearing his running clothes, his cheeks flushed. He had clearly just finished running. I tried not to let it bother me that he went without me. I didn't need to be so dependent on him, but it still felt like leaving me behind was deliberate.

He didn't seem to realize I was awake as he stripped off his shirt and threw it in the hamper by the closet. He ran his fingers through his hair then grabbed a towel from where it hung on the closet door to wipe the sweat off his body.

"Morning," I greeted, my voice sounding like there was a frog in my throat.

Wren's eyes darted over to me, looking intense at first until he schooled his expression into his usual one.

"Morning," he replied. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," I said. "A little groggy but not too bad."

This conversation felt stilted like the two of us had forgotten how to talk to each other. Or like I was a one night stand Wren was waiting to leave.

We looked at each other in silence for a few moments until Wren looked away and grabbed another shirt and threw it on. I couldn't help but feel like there was a huge elephant in the room that I was missing. It was like there was something between us that only Wren could see. I felt naked and exposed in front of him.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked him.

Wren pulled a crew neck sweatshirt from his closet and put that on over his shirt.

"Of course, I am," he replied, still not looking at me. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know," I said, feeling embarrassed and looking down at my lap. "I just thought... never mind."

Wren didn't press the issue, which felt so unlike him. He just kept moving around the room, tidying his closet and organizing his desk. I just watched him, unsure of what to do or say.

"Do you want to go get breakfast?" I asked him.

"I heat up some oatmeal earlier, not hungry," Wren said.

"Okay..." I said. "I'm just gonna..." I trailed, getting up from the bed to go into the bathroom.

Once the door was shut, I did what I needed then stood in front of the mirror for a few minutes. I had seen better days. My eyes were a little puffy, my cheeks red, and my hair a mess. I didn't think I had had much to drink last night, but clearly I had. And by the way Wren was acting, I must have done something.

I splashed my face with water and took a deep breath before leaving the bathroom. I couldn't stay in there forever even if I wanted to. I had to find out what I did to embarrass myself last night that had even Wren acting strange.

Wren was sitting at his desk typing on his laptop when I entered the room. He didn't look away from the screen when I made my way in and shut the door behind me.

"Hey..." I trailed. "Did I do something stupid last night?"

"You don't remember anything?" Wren asked, still not looking at me.

"I remember us dancing but it gets hazy after that," I told him. "I don't remember leaving and coming here."

Wren didn't say anything for a moment, just kept typing. It was irritating me how he seemed to want to will my existence away, like he wanted me gone but wouldn't say it. I didn't know how much longer I could stand here with the humiliation of my boyfriend wanting me out of his presence.

"You didn't do anything stupid," Wren said after a few moments.

I almost snapped at him then to ask him why he was acting the way he was if I supposedly didn't do anything, but I stopped myself. The thought of me acting crazy, seeing things that weren't there passed through my mind. Maybe Wren wasn't acting strange. Maybe I was just being paranoid.

"Okay..." I said, unsure of what to do next. "I guess I'll see you later then."

"Sure."

I didn't know whether to go over and kiss him, and he didn't give me any indication of what I should do. He didn't make a move for me, so I just turned toward the door feeling hollow.

This whole morning confused me. Nothing had happened. We didn't fight, neither of us were being mean, but there was just *something* that made me feel like I had been dumped. Something about his demeanor made me think I had just been kicked out even though I hadn't. My eyes were stinging, but I quickly pulled myself together. Nothing had happened. We were fine. There was nothing to be upset about.

I met up with Jess for breakfast and told her about my morning.

"You're sure I didn't do anything stupid?" I asked her.

Jess sat across from me with a steaming cup of coffee in her hand and a soft expression on her face. She listened to me intently, nodding along to my concerns and assuring me I wasn't being crazy.

"You didn't," she told me. "Not that I saw. You two were having a good time. You were all over each other! He seemed happy when he brought you home."

"So it was something I did after that," I said, sighing before taking a bite of my food.

"Or something he did," Jess retorted with raised eyebrows.

"What could he possibly have done to make him act like that? I don't even remember anything," I replied. "Wren doesn't get embarrassed. And he doesn't do anything he doesn't want to."

"Maybe he was just tired?" she suggested. "Maybe he was up taking care of you."

"I guess," I muttered. "But if he's tired, why go for a run this morning?"

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe you're overthinking this. He could just be having an off day. Why don't you just give him the day to himself and talk to him after hockey practice tonight?"

"I just can't help but feel like something is going to blow up in my face," I said, pushing my plate toward the center of the table and putting my face in my hands.

"Landon," Jess said, taking one of my hands in hers and pulling it from my face. I looked over at her, Jess smiling softly at me. "I think you're underestimating the connection you and Wren have. Whatever it is, you two will be fine. You two care about each other too much to let something come between you."

"I love him," I admitted and Jess's smile got wider.

"Have you told him that?"

"No, I can't," I quickly replied.

She narrowed her eyes. "Why not?"

"I just..."

It was hard to explain and it probably wouldn't make sense to her even if I did.

"I just can't." I let go of her hand.

Jess shot a me a knowing look, taking another sip of her coffee.

"It's ok to be scared," she said.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "And you've told Stella you love her, right?"

"Of course, I have," she replied with a laugh. "It's different with us though. Not as many repressed emotions."

I rolled my eyes. "Funny."

"Finish your breakfast and I'll drive you back to the dorms and then to practice," Jess said. "And then you can talk to Wren about your feelings and tell him you love him!"

"Somehow I don't think telling Wren I love him is going to solve anything," I said, taking another bite of my food. "It might just cause more problems."

"Or it could open up an even deeper connection in your relationship," she said like it was the obvious answer.

I ignored her and finished my breakfast.

Later on at practice, I tried to keep my mind off of Wren, but that was proving to be difficult. I knew I was acting out of sorts when Rojas skated over to me. He could always clock when something was wrong with me. It was like he had some sort of sensor to tell him when I needed a pep talk.

"You good, Reilly?" Rojas asked, bumping my shoulder. "Cooper isn't bothering you, is he?"

Cooper's suspension had ended and he was allowed to skate with the team again. Time would tell if he would actually get to play in a game, but he could at least be on the ice which was better than sitting in the stands.

Truthfully, I had barely noticed he was back. He had been keeping his head down, doing everything as coach said, probably because his hockey career meant a lot more to him than mine did to me. He didn't want to lose everything over this. He had probably worked his whole life for this, just as I had. Nothing was worth getting it ripped away from you.

"No, he's not bothering me," I told him. "I just have other shit going on."

"What other shit?"

I wasn't about to divulge my relationship problems with Rojas. Jess had already listened to me whine about it and she was really the only person I could talk to about Wren. But I did have something else that was weighing on my mind.

"Have you ever thought of quitting hockey?" I asked him, batting a puck toward the net. The shot went wide and hit the boards.

Rojas paused before replying. "Well, yeah. I didn't enter the draft for a reason."

"Oh, right," I said. "I didn't enter either."

"You still have time," he replied. "If that's what you want."

"I'm not sure that it is," I admitted with a sigh. "I don't even know if I want to play next year, let alone for the next twenty."

"Is this because of what happened with Cooper?" Rojas asked, keeping his voice quiet.

"No," I told him truthfully. "More like I don't know if I'm in this for the right reasons. I don't know if I actually want to be here or if I just think I *have* to want to because I spent my whole life working for this."

I had been beaten, bruised, and worked to the bone for this and now I wanted to give it up when for the first time the only person I was playing for was myself? It felt like a waste, like I worked and suffered for nothing.

"Well, I think you're the only person who can figure that out," Rojas said. "You have to decide what's important to you. No one else can give you that answer. If playing hockey doesn't make you happy, then you shouldn't keep playing just because you think you have to. But if it does make you happy, then that should be the reason you play, not because of anything else."

"Yeah..."

"And just because you spent your whole life working for this," Rojas continued, "it doesn't mean that was wasted time if you stop."

"It feels like it," I said, looking down at my skates. "It feels like everything was for nothing."

Rojas placed a hand on my shoulder.

"It's not for nothing. It's all part of your life's journey or whatever they say," Rojas said with a grin. "That's what life is about, really, just finding yourself."

He tapped my shoulder before pulling his hand away.

"And not for nothing, but you're a great hockey player," Rojas continued. "You have more skill and talent than most of the guys on this team, but if your heart's not in it you'll never reach your full potential. *That* will be the waste. There's no sense in someone who has the potential to be great to settle for being good."

"Thanks," I muttered. "For everything."

Rojas smiled. "Cheer up. As of right now, you're still on the team and we still have an hour of practice to get through."

I did my best to keep my mind on hockey throughout the rest of practice, but that proved to be difficult. l needed to think of what I would say to

Wren afterward. If I went to him unprepared, he would just talk his way out of the situation like he always did.

The problem was I didn't know what to say other than what I had said to him this morning. I still didn't know what had actually happened last night after my memories escaped me. Wren wouldn't tell me if he didn't want to, which he clearly didn't.

When practice ended, I took a shower and got changed before leaving the rink. I half expected Wren to be sitting out in his car waiting for me like he had been more often than not lately, but he wasn't there. That was how I knew he still wasn't over whatever happened last night.

I stopped by my dorm to put my things away before I started toward Brown's campus. I shivered as I stood at the bus stop with my hands in my pockets. The bus had just stopped here a few minutes before, so I had to wait a while for the next one to come.

When the bus finally stopped in front of me, I blew into my hands as I climbed on and took a seat toward the middle.

It didn't take long to get to the campus, but the bus dropped me off near the main area where the offices were, so I was still a bit far from Wren's dorm. It took me another fifteen minutes to walk to his building and another ten standing outside waiting for somebody to let me in.

Once I was in, I opted for the stairs instead of the elevator up to his floor. I wanted the extra time to prepare myself, though I knew it wouldn't do any good. It just allowed me to procrastinate for a little longer as I slowly ascended the steps.

There were people all around the building, moving their things back in since classes started back up tomorrow. Some guy passed by me on the stairs holding a bean bag chair over his head. That made me wonder if James had come back to the dorms or if he was still with Anthony. I couldn't have a serious conversation with Wren if James was there listening in and adding his two cents. But I also couldn't put this off or it was going to keep on bothering me like an itch that no amount of scratching could fix.

When I finally made it up to Wren's floor, there were people standing in the hallway. I had to walk in the middle of all of them to get by. They just kept talking like they didn't even notice.

Wren's door was in front of me now and I just stood there for a few moments before knocking. I heard movement on the other side of the door before a confused looking Wren opened it up.

"I thought you had practice," he said, standing in the doorway instead of inviting me in. I tried not to let that sting.

"I did," I said, trying my best to sound normal. "But it's over. Are you going to let me in or what?"

Wren looked surprised like he didn't even realize that he had blocked me from getting in the room. He moved aside and let me in before closing the door behind us. Luckily, James was nowhere in sight.

"I must have lost track of time," Wren said, going over to his desk and tapping on his phone to check the time. "I was going to pick you up."

I couldn't tell if he was lying or not, but I chose to believe he was telling me the truth. It made me feel a little better if he was.

"Look," I said, causing Wren to look up from his phone to meet my gaze. "We need to talk."

"About?"

"I thought we had a good time last night," I started, forcing myself to stand in place instead of bringing myself closer to Wren.

"We did."

"Well, I can't shake this feeling that something happened," I continued. "Something you're not telling me."

Wren raised his eyebrows at me.

"Is that so?" Wren asked. "What exactly do you think I'm keeping from you?"

"I don't know!" I exclaimed. "But it's causing you to act all weird. You could barely look at me this morning, let alone go get breakfast or spend any time at all with me."

"I didn't realize you wanted to spend time together this morning," he said, and this time I knew it was a lie.

"You mean you didn't realize that I expected us to do what we've been doing pretty much every day for the last month?" I asked in a slightly snarky tone. "If you wanted some alone time that's fine, but you can just tell me that instead of making me feel like I need to just take the hint."

"I didn't intend to make you feel that way," Wren replied, putting his hands in his pockets.

"So, what is it?" I asked. "I know there's something."

Wren shot me a blank stare, but it was one that took effort for him to do, to hide what he was really feeling.

"You don't have to worry," Wren insisted after a few moments.

" *Wren* ," I said in a pleading tone. I hated how pathetic I sounded, but I would beg him from my knees if I had to if that would make him tell me.

He looked down at the floor and leaned back against his desk.

"You were just saying things last night," he said, his voice so quiet I had to strain to hear him. "You were drunk... so it's alright. It's fine."

"What did I say?" I was getting more confused when I should have been getting clarity.

Wren wouldn't look at me and that was bothering me. I couldn't imagine saying anything so bad that it would rattle Wren of all people. He could always take everything in stride, so why was this turning him timid?

"Wren, what did I say?" I asked with more force in my tone.

The tension between us was suffocating at this point. It felt like if I even tried to move closer to him something would force me further away. It was like if I moved forward, the room would grow longer just to bring him further and further away from me with every step I took.

He didn't look up when he said it.

"You said you love me," he muttered.

I felt the air leave my lungs. My breaths felt labored for a moment, but they evened out quickly. I felt somewhat relieved. I hadn't said anything horrible or unforgivable to him, just something I wasn't ready to say. That didn't make it untrue.

"Oh," I responded. "That's not how I wanted to tell you."

Wren finally looked up at me, his lips turned downward in a frown.

"You meant it?" he asked, his eyes widening.

"Well, yeah," I sheepishly replied, rocking on me heels slightly.

Wren didn't look happy or relieved at my words. In fact, he looked sick which was enough to turn my stomach over.

"I'm confused," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "You don't want me to love you? Isn't that what a relationship is about?"

"Well, I-" Wren stopped himself. He was at a loss for words and I found myself getting angry at his reaction to all of this. Why was he acting like me loving him was disgusting and wrong?

"Is it really that big of a surprise to you?" I asked, stepping a little closer. "I was sure my feelings were obvious to you."

"They weren't," Wren responded.

"I kinda thought it was just that we hadn't said it yet," I told him, my voice shaking. "Not that we didn't feel it. I love you, I feel loved *by* you."

Wren's eyes widened at that and then it all clicked for me.

"Wait, that's the issue," I started. "You're scared of love."

"No, I'm not," Wren quickly replied, his eyes still wide.

"Well, then you don't like the fact that I love you," I replied with an eye roll.

"That's not it."

"You're going to stand there and act like you don't love me back then."

I could feel myself getting angrier the longer I looked at him. It wasn't how he usually looked at me. He was looking at me now like I was a stranger.

"Landon," he said, but then said nothing else.

"But you do love me back," I told him. "Or if you don't, you have a shitty way of showing it."

"That's not it."

"Then what is it?" I snapped. "Look. I'm sorry I said it while I was drunk, but that doesn't change that it's how I feel," I said, narrowing my eyes at him.

I loved him, but I hated when he had nothing to say. I hated the way he was staring at me, willing this conversation to end just because it was one he didn't want to have.

"What is it, Wren? Tell me!" I snapped again. "You can't tell me you love me? Is that it? You can't even say the words? Fine! I never asked you to say it back!"

Wren sighed, closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them to look straight into mine.

"Love isn't for me," he said. I felt myself deflate.

"Then what do you call this?" I asked, my voice a whisper.

"A relationship."

"One without love?"

He didn't say anything to that.

My eyes started to sting. I had to get out of there.

"You're lying," I said through gritted teeth, my heart being squeezed in my chest. "You're a liar and I see right through you."

I was humiliated. It was like I tore my heart out and handed it to Wren with a big smile on my face and he looked at me with pity as he threw it in the trash.

"And if you're going to be like this then I'm going to just go," I said quickly, turning toward the door.

"Are you breaking up with me?"

I let out a humorless, angry laugh.

"I'm sure you can figure it out," I said.

I tore open the door and slammed it shut behind me, stomping through the hall and down the stairs.

When I got outside, a tear fell and I angrily wiped it away as I waited for the bus to bring me back to my dorm where I could battle between my anger and sadness alone.

**

thanks for reading!! let me know your thoughts.

49

Wren Ridley

There were times where I truly didn't understand anything, not even myself. I couldn't understand why I couldn't bring myself to be totally open and vulnerable with Landon. It didn't make sense, really. Everything I felt toward him had to point to love, so why was it so hard for me to consider that? Why did the thought of love shut me down and make me rethink everything I had ever felt toward him?

Having to confront these feelings made me feel like I didn't even know myself.

Love wasn't for me. It was never something I expected for myself, never something I thought I would want. I couldn't help but think I never wanted this for myself because I thought it couldn't be possible, that no one outside of my family would ever care for me the way Landon did.

I was always a bit of a loner. Any friends I had were really just acquaintances and I had never been in a serious relationship. I always found myself bitter toward people in love, thinking it was useless and fake. I never wanted someone to know me on such a deep level that they even had the capacity to love me.

My feelings for Landon were so large, like they couldn't even fit inside my body, but I always assigned them to something else. It was affection or care or adoration, but never love. I never even thought of love until it was presented to me by him the other night and it made me freeze up. It made me feel insecure and uncertain of what my own feelings actually were.

The worst part of all this was that I couldn't even vocalize any of my feelings to Landon. I was a fraud, a pretender, acting like I was smart and good with my words when in reality I was the opposite. I was emotionally

inept and too much of a coward to say anything. Landon didn't deserve that and I didn't deserve for him to love me.

It was the day after Landon broke things off that I was sitting at my desk, typing up the finishing lines of my manuscript that James walked in with a wide smile on his face, clearing having just come from Anthony's place.

"Man, I see it now," James said, going over to his bed and dropping himself into it on his back.

"See what?" I asked, continuing my typing.

"Why you're in a relationship," he replied. "It's great!"

"I take it things are going well with Anthony," I said, ignoring the fact that I was actually not in a relationship anymore. James would find out soon enough if my mood was anything to go by.

"Better than well," James said with a grin, sitting up on his bed to look over at me. His grin fell when he saw me. "Okay, what's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"You look like you haven't slept."

"I haven't."

James was quiet for a moment, trying to figure me out.

I had been up all night working on my manuscript, trying to keep my mind off of what had happened with Landon. The night went on without me realizing the hours were ticking by and eventually the sun had come up. By then I was almost done and there was no use in me stopping my momentum just to get some sleep.

"Okay..." James trailed. "Why didn't you sleep last night?"

"I was busy," I replied. "I'm actually still busy if you could leave me alone."

"Alright." James got up from his bed and walked over to me before nearly closing my laptop shut on my fingers.

"This isn't leaving me alone," I told him with narrowed eyes.

"You're acting weirder than usual right now," he said. "So something is up that you're not telling me. So, what is it? Did Landon dump you again?"

He said it sarcastically, like he didn't actually think that was what was wrong, but then a look of realization crossed his face.

"That is what happened, isn't it?" James asked. "What did you do this time?"

Instead of answering him, I stood up from my chair and walked over to my closet to put on my running clothes. James tried to get my attention, but I had gotten quite good at ignoring him, so I was able to get changed and leave the room without him stopping me. I stopped in the bathroom before heading outside.

The air was cool, but not too frigid. It was slightly warmer than expected going into February, sunny with a slight breeze. People were walking around with just light jackets on, reveling in the sun that was dearly missed during these cold winter months. It would have been fine if I were in the mood for it, but I wasn't. I wished it were cold and gray outside.

I had put my headphones in, but I wasn't listening to anything. There was nothing I would have been able to pay attention to. They just acted as a way to make it so no one would approach me.

My mind was a dark place to be stuck in at the moment and I had no one to blame but myself. Landon was right about me. It seemed as though words always came easy to me except the ones that really mattered. I was a liar and I was scared, but most of all I just avoided any emotions that made me feel uncomfortable or uncertain. That wasn't a sustainable way to live, and it had caught up to me rather harshly.

I zoned out for most of my run. I couldn't remember the path I took from school to get to where I was now. It wasn't until I bumped into someone that I was aware of my surroundings. It just so happened that it was the one someone that definitely did not want to see me at that moment.

Landon didn't even scowl at me or look angry. He looked completely indifferent, like we were strangers.

He was wearing clothes similar to mine. The pants he was wearing actually looked like they were mine. They fit a little tighter than his clothes usually did. The two of us had spent so much time together over winter break that some of our clothes had gotten mixed together in the closet or the dresser. Sometimes we would just pick out clothes and it would end up being the other person's, but it didn't really matter so we just wore it anyway.

There were probably numerous articles of my clothing that were still in Landon's dorm room because I never really fully moved out of there after winter break. I didn't expect to not be going back to his dorm. I expected to still spend some nights there, so there was no use in bringing all my clothes back to my room.

"Landon," I said as we stood and stared at each other for a moment. There was so much else I could, should, say, but all I could say was his name. As if that would make anything better.

He heard me. I saw a little emotion cross his face, but he quickly pulled his face back to an emotionless expression. Clearly, he didn't want me to know how he was feeling. He had gotten better at hiding his emotions from me.

Landon at least looked like he had slept, but he didn't look relaxed. His posture was rigid, his hand clenched by his side.

I went to say his name again, but before I could he turned away from me and continued his run like I wasn't even there. I deserved that.

The next few days went by in a fog. I went to my classes, but I didn't learn anything in them. I started going on my runs in the evening while Landon

was likely at practice so we wouldn't run into each other again. He didn't want to see me and I couldn't fault him for that.

This was different than the last time we were separated. This time was completely my fault because I was too much of a coward to divulge my true feelings and tell Landon I loved him when he was laying everything out in front of me. He was the one being vulnerable and I shut him down.

Even having been through this once before, it didn't prepare me to face these feelings again. I felt lost, like no matter what direction I went in, it was the wrong one. I was stuck and hurt, my feelings caging me and preventing me from making any forward progress in my life.

The bright side was that James had been spending a lot of time at Anthony's so I didn't have to deal with him trying to pry into my business.

Later on in the week, I sat down at the coffee shop with my laptop, reworking some things in my novel. It was a risk being here considering Landon could walk in at any moment, but I couldn't help but be a little selfish and hope that he would; that he would walk in and we would lock eyes and somehow I would be able to tell him everything I needed to say and he would forgive me and things would go back to normal. But that was unrealistic. It would never be that easy. The truth of it was that if Landon really did walk in here, the two of us would avoid each other.

I closed the tab of my manuscript and started working on something else. Maybe if I could get everything I wanted to say to Landon typed out, it would be easier to say to him. I could read it over, perfect it, and be able to say the words to his face.

Dear Landon, I-

"So, how is single life treating you?" Anthony asked, standing in front of where I was sitting. He had a smug look on his face. I backspaced what I had written as I looked up at him.

"Spending too much time with James?" I asked.

"He didn't tell me that, Landon did," Anthony replied, sitting down across from me.

It shouldn't have surprised me that Landon had spoken to Anthony. The two of them had formed some kind of friendship. I just hadn't realized how close of a friendship.

"I have no idea what you did this time, but I'm team Landon anyway," Anthony told me with a sardonic smile, his tone almost mocking.

"And I thought we were friends," I sarcastically replied.

Anthony shrugged. "So, what did you do?"

I wanted to come up with some smart response to make Anthony angry and forget about the conversation we were having, but I didn't have it in me. I was tired.

"Shouldn't you be working?" I asked him, shutting my laptop.

"I just clocked out," he said. "You've been here for hours."

I hadn't even noticed the time passing by. I missed one of my classes, but I couldn't find it in me to care.

"Well, then I must get going," I said, signaling I wanted this conversation to end. I packed up my things and stood up from my seat. Anthony was still sitting in the seat across from me, the seat Landon usually occupied.

"Wren, if you have the ability to make things right, then just do it," Anthony said, stopping me before I could walk away. "Stop running away and being all stoic and mysterious. I'm sure it's exhausting for both of you."

With that, I left the coffee shop and went straight back to my dorm. Luckily, James was gone, clearly not with Anthony, but I didn't care enough to find out where he actually was.

My desk was a mess, so I got into bed with a notebook and pen and started writing what I had started earlier. Writing by hand could be helpful. I

couldn't just delete my progress; I would have to be faced with all of it. Writing like this was more personal, it dug deeper into the heart.

Dear Landon, I wish my mouth could speak these words because you deserve to hear them, but for now, I must write them down. This way, I cannot hide what I want to say.

I kept writing until I filled up the page.

***

I woke up later on to James and Stella standing over me at the side of my bed. I rubbed my eyes and got a clearer look at the two of them. They were wearing matching serious expressions, both staring at me with their hands on their hips.

"What is wrong with you two?" I asked in a groggy voice, sitting up and stretching my arms above my head.

"What's wrong with you?" Stella asked. "You're sleeping in the middle of the day, your side of the room is messier than James's, you're in a bad mood, something is up."

"Great investigative work there, Stella," I said, to which she narrowed her eyes. Stella leaned forward and flicked my forehead. "Ow."

"Don't be an ass," she said. "Especially when we're just worrying about you. You know, like friends do."

"There's no need."

"That's bullshit," James interjected. "Obviously you're fighting with Landon again. Otherwise, you wouldn't be like this."

"You already have it figured out, so what is the point of all this?" I asked, gesturing to the two of them.

"The *point* is," Stella started, "you're sad, and as your friends we want to be there for you."

"Yes, I'm sad," I admitted. "But it's not the end of the world nor is it your problem."

" *Wren* ," Stella said, drawing my name out as she hopped up to sit on the edge of my bed. "Of course, it's our problem. You're our friend."

"Though, you don't make it easy," James added with a grin. "You're kinda stuck with us."

I didn't even have it in me to be annoyed at that. James was right; I was stuck with them whether I wanted to be or not.

"Are you going to tell us what happened?" Stella asked.

"Jess didn't tell you?" I replied. The two of them were joined at the hip, and I was sure Landon had told her. She was who he was closest to other than me or his sister.

Stella shook her head. "She just said that you two broke up. She didn't go into details."

"I think Anthony is in on it too," James said, dragging over my desk chair and sitting down. "I tried asking him about it, but he... distracted me."

"We don't need to hear any details," I quickly replied. James was the type to go into *way* too much detail unprovoked.

James and Stella both looked at me expectantly, waiting for me to tell them what they were both eager to hear. It didn't matter if they knew or not. Nothing would change. Landon would still love me but wish he didn't. He would still try to hate me no matter who knew.

"Landon broke up with me," I told them. They were staring at me intently, waiting for me to continue.

"Well, yeah, we gathered that much," Stella replied. "What happened?"

"He told me he loves me," I said plainly, like saying the words out loud didn't affect me. Only they did. It felt like part of me was being ripped out

to say them out loud.

"I'm not seeing the issue," James said after a few moments. "So, he loves you, no idea why, but isn't that a good thing?"

"I didn't say it back," I muttered. I couldn't look at either of them. "I couldn't." It was embarrassing to admit.

They both waited for me to go on.

"He said it when he was drunk and I just freaked out," I continued. "I was avoiding him, avoiding talking about it, and then he confronted me. I told him love wasn't for me. And he left."

"But you do love him," Stella pointed out.

"Well-" I started.

"Don't even try to deny it, Wren," she said, putting her hand up to stop me. "I know you like to lie, but that's just not believable."

"I think," James cut in, pointing his finger at me, "there's a really simple solution to this."

"Oh God," Stella muttered.

"Go tell Landon you love him," James finished.

"Oh, that's actually a good idea," Stella responded with a smile. "I like that idea."

I shook my head. "I can't."

"Why the hell not?" James asked.

I couldn't tell them that I was still too much of a coward to say it, that love still freaked me out and it was still hard for me to accept that someone loved me and that I loved them. It would sound so stupid out loud. It barely made any sense in my head.

I wanted so badly to just be able to get out of my own head, to stop being the way that I was. I always blocked out my emotions, thinking that was the way I wanted to live, but now I couldn't even talk about my feelings out loud. I couldn't talk about them with my friends, my family, with Landon.

Stella seemed to notice my moment of distress and put her hand over mine. I had been gripping my blanket tightly like it would provide me with some sense of relief. She gave me a look of understanding, rubbing her thumb over the top of my hand.

"Let's go," Stella said after a moment, getting up from my bed.

James and I looked at each other, confused.

"Go where?" James asked.

"Um, to dinner?" she said, looking at us like we were idiots. "It's six o'clock and none of us have eaten."

"We're just dropping this conversation?" James asked, standing from my desk chair.

"Yes, let's go," Stella said, tugging on my hand to get me out of bed.

I went with them to dinner and we didn't talk about my failed relationship or my tendency to lie, which honestly made me feel better.

My appetite was smaller and I still felt like a part of me was missing, but I could pretend for an hour that everything was normal.

I could pretend, just for that moment, there wasn't still an ache in my chest reminding me of what I'd lost.

**

THANKS FOR READING tell me your thoughts.

50

Landon Reilly

I didn't really know how it happened, but somehow I ended up eating breakfast at a diner with Rojas, Jess, and Anthony one day.

I wasn't even sure the three of them had ever said more than a passing word to one another, but I was walking with Jess one morning when we ran into Rojas, who then decided to join us at the coffee shop where Anthony worked. Then Jess just probably assumed that made us all friends and now we were hanging out as the four of us, which felt weird. It felt like the three of them all came from different parts of my life and shouldn't have been mixing together.

"Chris, pass me the salt," Jess said to Rojas. She insisted on calling him by his first name, which he didn't seem to mind. He said that it was really only the hockey guys that called him by his last name.

Jess was sitting next to me on the outside of the booth while Anthony sat across from her with Rojas next to him.

I couldn't get over how strange it felt to be sitting here with all of them, but I knew Jess probably wanted to make sure I wasn't going to just sit in my dorm and wallow in self pity over my break up with Wren. Without her, that was probably what I would have been doing, but she made sure to keep me busy.

Even with keeping busy, my heart didn't hurt any less. I still felt lonely at the end of the night when I got back to the dorm, even if my roommate, Kyle, was there. Part of me wanted to just go back to Wren and tell him he didn't need to love me and being together was enough. But I couldn't do that. It would just end up hurting me more in the end. And there was no way Jess would let me do that.

"You guys seriously need to start winning games," Jess said to Rojas. They had already been talking, but I was zoned out of the conversation.

Rojas just laughed then looked over at me, his expression changing to a puzzled one.

"Earth to Landon," Rojas said, waving a hand in front of my face.

"I'm here," I said, swatting his hand away.

"Didn't seem like it," he replied, leaning back in his seat. "You looked far away."

"Are we not doing a good enough job distracting you?" Jess asked, looking genuinely concerned.

"I don't think anything could distract me right now," I told her with a sad smile.

"Well, if we're talking about it, I saw Wr-," Anthony started, but paused when Jess shot him a look, "he who shall not be named the other day."

"Yeah, so did I," I said, remembering the way we had run into each other.

It was reminiscent of one of our first encounters earlier on in the school year. The thought made me sad, how we went from being basically strangers to so much more, and how much had changed between us in such a short amount of time.

I wished Wren could just say what I needed to hear because I knew he loved me. There was no way what either of us felt for the other wasn't enough, but I supposed that just loving each other wasn't enough. He didn't love me enough to say it back. He didn't love me enough to hold onto me. That was what my life had always been like. No one ever loved me enough, but that had never affected me as much as it was right now. I wanted so badly for Wren to love me enough.

"He looked kinda rough," Anthony continued. "He sat in the coffee shop for hours without even realizing."

The last time Wren and I had broken up, it was apparent that he was not as good at dealing with emotions as he liked to pretend. He was actually quite bad it, so this news didn't surprise me, but it did cause a squeeze in my chest as I thought about him feeling down and being alone.

"What if you try to make him jealous?" Jess asked, turning toward me. "Let him see what he's missing. If he's going through it, he clearly wants you back. He just needs a kick in the ass."

"And how would I do that?" I muttered, not that I was seriously considering her suggestion.

I wasn't entirely sure Wren would even be jealous if I tried, though he seemed jealous back when Micah visited and our relationship was new, but I didn't want to do that to him purposely. And there was no way I was going to be able to find anyone to make him jealous with.

"You could pretend to be seeing Chris," Jess suggested, motioning toward Rojas, who stopped reaching for his food the moment his name was mentioned.

"Yeah, not happening," I said, shaking my head.

"I think it's a good idea," Anthony said, earning a look of appreciation from Jess.

"You would," I retorted.

"I'd do it with you, but he knows I'm with James," Anthony said. "And James would be pissed. He *is* the jealous type."

"It wouldn't really work if it was you though," Jess said. "Because he knows you, but he doesn't know Chris."

Rojas cleared his throat, causing the rest of us to look at him. I was embarrassed this conversation was even happening.

"I don't mind, if Landon thinks this would help," Rojas said. He sounded genuine, but I was still embarrassed about him being dragged into this.

"No, I'm not doing it," I said, my tone making it clear that this was my final decision.

A couple days later, Jess invited Rojas and I to the coffee shop where Anthony worked and then conveniently something came up so she couldn't go with us, leaving just Rojas and me while Anthony was working. And even more conveniently, Wren happened to be there.

I knew without even knowing that Jess and Anthony set this up. Anthony must have told her Wren was there, so she got Rojas and me to show up as if the two of us being there together was enough to make Wren jealous. Wren didn't even look up when we walked in there. He was too focused on whatever he was doing on his laptop, which was probably the novel he had been working on.

"I swear I had nothing to do with this," Rojas whispered to me as we waited for our coffees.

"Oh, I know," I replied, shooting daggers at Anthony who was smiling to himself behind the counter. "I know exactly who had something to do with this."

"We can leave," Rojas offered.

"Coffee for Landon!" Anthony called out with a grin, placing my coffee down on the counter.

I didn't even know if Wren noticed or looked in my direction because I was too busy glaring at Anthony and wanting to shrivel up and die of embarrassment.

After Rojas got his drink, the two of us found a place to sit beside each other, which happened to be in view of Wren. He still had his eyes glued to his computer, giving me no indication he even knew I was here. I couldn't tell if I wanted him to look at me or if I wanted him to remain unaware.

"That's him, right?" Rojas said, nodding in Wren's direction.

I sighed. "Yeah, that's him."

"Do you want to tell me what happened with you two?" he asked. "I mean, obviously you don't have to, but if you want to talk about it, I'm all ears."

The truth was I didn't want to talk about it. I gave the whole story to Jess, and she had been nothing but supportive, though what she did this morning might have been stepping too far. I gave a brief rundown to Micah who did his best to be supportive, but wasn't that good at it without knowing all the details or having to talk through text.

It was too embarrassing to tell it all to Rojas. The two of us were friends, but he we weren't *that* close. And he was the captain of my hockey team, so he kind of *had* to make sure I was good. Being setup to be there with him at the coffee shop and pretend we were on a date was embarrassing enough. I didn't need to tell him that this was happening because my boyfriend basically told me he couldn't love me.

"There's really nothing to talk about," I told him, taking a sip of my coffee while still looking over at Wren.

"It doesn't seem like either of you even want to be broken up," Rojas said. "At least from what Anthony and Jess were saying, so why are you?"

"It's... complicated." And mortifying.

Just then, Wren's eyes moved from his screen and looked right at me. The world stopped for a moment until Wren moved his gaze to Rojas sitting beside me. Rojas had gotten closer without me realizing, like he didn't know if I wanted to go through with the jealousy plan, but he was ready for it if I decided to.

Wren studied us for a moment, like we were one of the only things he couldn't figure out. I couldn't read his expression. He was always able to keep his face blank and hide his true feelings from any outsider that tried to read him.

I liked to think that I had broken through him a little bit, that I could read him better the closer I got to him. It was like all of that went away as soon as we broke up because as I looked at his face now, there was nothing I could gather from it. Wren had put a wall up that I couldn't break through.

Part of me wanted to move closer to Rojas, let him put his arm around me just to see if there would be a reaction from Wren. But I couldn't make myself do it.

It didn't seem to matter whether or not I tried to make Wren jealous because he quickly packed up his things and left, his expression never changing. I felt myself deflate a little.

"Well, that might have worked," Rojas said after Wren was gone. "And we didn't even have to do anything."

"No, he just didn't want to see me," I mumbled, looking down at the table.

Probably because when he tried talking to me the other day, I turned and left without giving him the chance. Maybe he was ready to open himself up for me at that moment, to be vulnerable, and I didn't let him. Maybe he wouldn't be ready to do that again. And I blew any chance I had of him coming clean about his feelings and the two of us getting back together.

Rojas and I didn't talk much the rest of the time we were there at the coffee shop. We finished our drinks and headed back toward campus in time for my first class.

***

Olivia had texted me later on that day from the iPod I gave her while I was at hockey practice about how our parents were ruining her life so she ran off to her boyfriend Jimmy's house. I didn't see the text until about an hour after she sent it, and when I texted her back, she called me from an unknown number.

"Livi?" I asked as I answered.

"Yeah, Landon, it's me," she answered in a whisper. "I'm calling from Jimmy's phone, but he doesn't know I'm calling you."

"Who does he think you're calling?"

"Mom," she replied. "I told him they took my phone, which is true, and that I wanted to call them to let them know where I am, which is untrue."

"What happened?" I asked as I left the locker room.

Rojas and I nodded toward each other as a goodbye and I walked outside to start back toward my dorm. I still hadn't gotten used to walking back to the dorms after practice. I was too used to Wren picking me up, the two of us getting dinner, and then spending the night together. It hadn't been long enough for me to get used to anything else, but it felt like ages ago.

"They're really working me hard because I fucked up so bad at the last competition," Livi told me, her voice hushed. "Which my ankle is still injured, so I'm not even supposed to be skating right now. I'm supposed to be resting, but they don't want that. Plus, Dad has been kinda mad at me I think because of you and I talking. It's like he thinks I betrayed him or something."

"Well, are you okay?" I asked her, feeling all sorts of worry swarm my thoughts. "They haven't done anything to you, have they?"

"Other than breathing down my neck? No, nothing," she replied, letting some of my worry slip away. "I just wanted to let you know what's going on in case you don't hear from me for a little bit. I'm not really grounded, at least that's not what they're calling it, but I basically am. I had to sneak out to even get to Jimmy's."

"They grounded you just for messing up at the competition?" I asked, feeling like I was missing something.

Back when I lived with our parents, our father would punish me if he felt I wasn't performing well in hockey. But it was always different with Olivia, whether that be because she was younger or because she was a girl, but our

father was always more lenient with her. It was our mother who was strict with Olivia, but she was never as strict as our father was with me.

Our mother might have scolded Olivia if she thought she was slacking, or dictate her diet like our father did to me, but our father was the truly harsh of the two.

"Like I said, not really grounded," she continued. "But basically, yeah. Dad thinks I'm becoming 'undisciplined' and losing my focus. Mom thinks I'm getting fat and not following my diet plan, which I'm not. Dad hasn't come outright and said it but he's pissed that I've been talking to you."

"Yeah, I can imagine."

"He said it like he was trying to keep me safe from you, that you would hurt me or distract me, but I could tell he was angry underneath it all."

He was good at pretending, always had been. He had to be to not raise any suspicions at the church about how he was treating me. Even the Hanson's had said to me that they never suspected anything while Micah and I were kids. It wasn't until Dad started being more vocal at church and hanging around with Elijah's stepfather, Dave, that they really started to think there was more to my father than they had ever known.

I didn't know what I could do for my sister. I so badly wanted to get her out of there, but I had no place to bring her. It wasn't like I could have her come live in the dorms with me, and I didn't want to ask the Hanson's for even more than I already had.

"Anyway, I wanted to check in with you," Livi said after a few moments. "Are you doing okay?"

"I'm..." I trailed.

I didn't know what to say. It felt like I was just going through the motions trying my hardest to push my emotions and any thought of Wren to the back of my mind. Only I couldn't really do that and I spent a lot of my time thinking about Wren and feeling sorry for myself that I couldn't make him

love me enough to want to keep me. I couldn't tell her that though. I wasn't even sure that Livi knew what my relationship with Wren actually was.

"Don't even try to lie to me," she said before I could come up with a lie. "I can hear it in your voice that you're not 'fine' so don't even say the word fine or I'm going to explode." She was still whispering and her voice was rushed, so I could tell that our conversation was running out of time.

"I'm... going through something," I admitted, my words coming out slowly. "But I'm handling it. I'm spending time with my friends, so it's going good. Everything's good."

"Well, I'm happy to hear that you have friends," Livi joked.

I heard her muffled voice after that, like she had pulled the phone away from her face and covered the speaker. That seemed to tell me that our time is up.

"Landon, I gotta go," she said, sounding annoyed. "You might not hear from me for a little bit because Mom and Dad are watching me like a hawk, but I'll reach out to you as soon as I can."

"Okay, be safe," I said. "I love you."

"I love you too." And with that, she hung up.

I tried not to think too much about being unable to reach Livi because the thought of it made me feel so anxious I could start shaking. She could handle herself with our parents. She had been doing it for a while without me already, so she could do it now and everything would be fine. That was what I had to tell myself to calm myself down.

Between the Wren situation and the Livi situation, I was an emotional wreck.

It turned out it wasn't too long I had to go without hearing from Livi because later on that night, I received a text from her iPod. I was relieved to have heard from her until I saw what the text actually said.

I read the text and my blood ran ice cold.

**

thanks for reading! let me know your thoughts!

51

Landon Reilly

From: Livi

landon i need you to come home right now it's an emergency. dads going crazy. i need you

As soon as I saw the text from Livi, my heart was racing. It didn't help that when I replied asking what was going on, she didn't respond and gave no details about what actually had happened. I didn't know what I would be walking into, but it didn't matter. I had to get to Livi no matter what.

The problem was I had no way of getting there. I wasn't exactly in the position to ask Wren for a ride, though I thought about it. He would probably bring me if I explained the situation, but I couldn't bring myself to call him. But if all else failed, I'd have to.

I pulled out my phone and sent a group text out to Jess, Anthony, and Rojas.

To: Group

anybody want to drive me to my house or let me borrow their car? it's urgent.

From: Rojas

I can't drive you, but you can borrow my car. Is everything ok?

To: Group

not sure yet but ur a life saver

From: Jess

keep us updated!!

I raced over to Rojas's dorm building to meet up with him to pick up the car. I was out of breath by the time I got there and anxiously waited for him to meet me outside. All I could think about was something was happening to Livi and I wasn't there to protect her.

After was seemed like an eternity, but was only actually a few minutes, Rojas met me outside.

"Do you need someone to go with you?" Rojas asked as he handed over the keys. "I can cancel what I have going on tonight. I'm just going to a Providence Bruins game with some friends."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "It's probably better I go alone. Thanks for letting me use the car."

My hands were shaking, the keys jingling. Rojas looked at me like he was trying to see through me. I started toward his car until I realized I had no idea which car was his. He continued looking at me like he was trying to read my mind as he led me over to his car.

"Are you sure you want to go alone?" Rojas asked as I slid into the driver's seat.

"Yeah," I assured him. "I really need to go."

Rojas backed up so I could close the door and then I started the car.

Sitting behind the wheel for a moment made me realize that I hadn't driven a car in almost a year. When I left my parents' house, my car stayed there so I had no car to drive. Living with the Hansons, I was driven around by one of them.

So now I was going to drive home, which wasn't exactly far but it could be a difficult drive with the traffic, after not having driven for almost a year in a car that wasn't mine. I couldn't dwell on that realization for too long. Livi needed me and I had to get going.

I put the car in drive and slowly pulled out of the parking spot. Rojas watched me as I drove away. My eyes drifted toward the rearview mirror to see him standing there.

I tapped on the brakes and jolted slightly. Okay, I had to get used to those. I started moving again very slowly, heading toward the high way.

I drove slow, despite being anxious to get there. The last thing I needed was to get in an accident. Not only would I have to pay Rojas for the damages with money I didn't have, but it would delay me getting to Livi.

My hands gripped the steering wheel to the point where they started aching. I tried to ease up on it, but it was no use. My nerves were getting the better of me and I couldn't control the physical reactions I was having. The motion of the car combined with the Livi situation made me feel so sick I could throw up.

As much as I didn't want to crash Rojas's car, I didn't want to throw up in it either. That would just be embarrassing.

I couldn't stop thinking about Livi and whether or not she was hurt. I was so angry I was seeing red. If my father had done something to her, I knew I wouldn't be able to control myself. I would beat him until he was black and blue. And I wouldn't stop until someone overpowered me and got me off of him. It was one thing for him to hurt me, but if he hurt Livi, I would make sure he wished he never laid a finger on her.

Even just thinking about what he could have done to her made any progress I made with my anger vanish. It was like I had never gone to therapy and learned to manage it. I was mad and I did nothing to calm myself down because I *wanted* to be mad. I wanted to be as angry as I possibly could be if I had to face my father.

If the universe was on my side, I would be able to just drop by the house, get Livi, and leave. But I knew the universe was definitely not on my side. That was just wishful thinking. It never had been on my side otherwise it wouldn't have birthed me into this family to begin with.

Luckily, there wasn't much traffic, but it didn't make the drive feel any quicker. My jaw was clenched, my eyes narrowed on the road in front of me. If something had happened to my sister, my father was to blame, but I couldn't help but blame myself too.

I should have done something sooner. I knew what our father was capable of. I remembered everything he had done to me, but I still somehow thought Livi would be safe from that. If only I had figured out how to get her out of there sooner, then she would have been safe a long time ago. This was partially my fault and that made me even angrier, even just at myself.

When I was about ten minutes away, I finally got a response from Livi which took away about half of my anxiety. At least she was well enough to communicate with me.

From: Livi

i made it outside, meet me behind the big tree in the backyard.

I sent a thumbs up reaction to her message and started driving a little faster, anxious to get to her and see that she was safe.

When I got to the house, I parked a little bit down the street and snuck into the backyard. I glanced over at the house, looking through the windows to see if I could get a glimpse of my father. All the lights were on downstairs, but he was nowhere to be found.

I moved slowly through the yard, careful not to make any noise or draw any attention to myself. The last thing I needed was one of the neighbor's dogs hearing me and blowing my cover by barking or something.

The tree Livi wanted me to meet her at was in the back corner of the yard by the fence. It was the biggest tree in the yard with a trunk large enough for us to hide behind so we couldn't be viewed from the house. I tiptoed over to the tree and called out quietly to Livi once I was close enough.

"Livi," I whispered, seeing my breath as I breathed out. "Olivia," I repeated.

She didn't respond, so I continued forward. I glanced at the house one more time to make sure I hadn't been caught before I rounded the tree to meet my sister.

Only it wasn't my sister who stood there.

It was my father, holding the iPod I had given Livi.

I was too stunned in the moment to do anything, which had cost me. It was only a split second, but he used that to his advantage. My father grabbed me by the throat and held me up against the tree before I could even move.

"Landon," he said. His voice was smooth and calm, like this was a casual meeting. He sounded so normal, like I was his son that had just come home from college for the weekend and not his son that he lured into a trap.

"Let... go..." I choked out, his grip on my throat shortening my breaths.

"Clearly, I need to go through more extreme measures to get you to hear me properly," he said, his grip tightening.

My hands pulled at his, but his grip was too strong for me to pry him off.

"I told you to stop speaking to Olivia," my father continued. "Yet, you continued and somehow thought I wouldn't find out about it."

"Where is... she?" It was getting harder and harder for me to breathe. I was fairly confident he would let go, but I couldn't be too certain. He definitely didn't want a murder charge, but who knew what kind of strings he could pull to get himself out of one.

"And you thought I would hurt my daughter?" he laughed, shaking his head. His eyes were so dark, they looked black out here. I got my eyes from him, a deep forest green. I hated the thought that this is what I looked like when I was angry, that my eyes could look this black and soulless.

I kicked at his knee, getting him to loosen his grip. Then I kicked him again and he let go, kneeling over.

"Where is Olivia?" I shouted, grabbing him by the hair. "Where is my sister?"

My father snarled at me and grabbed me by the wrist, then with his other hand, he punched me right in the side of the head. The impact made me stumble, and it was dizzying. My surroundings were spinning and I was losing my balance.

Then he hit me again and I fell. I blinked slowly, my eyes rolling back. My vision doubled as he looked down at me. I saw two of his sinister smirks and two fists coming down on me again.

"Dad! Stop!" Livi shrieked.

"Stay there!" his voiced boomed. "Do not come out here!"

I could hear Olivia's cries as I forced myself to stay awake, my eyes continuing to slowly blink.

"Dad, please!" Livi cried from the back porch. I could hear hear foot steps on the stairs. "Please! He needs help! He's not moving!"

"He's awake, Olivia, get back in the house," he demanded. I tried to get up while he was distracted, but he saw my slow moving body and pushed me back down with his foot.

"Peter, don't you think this is too far?" my mother asked. Her voice was a little shaky, but she wasn't as upset as Livi.

"Both of you, shut up and let me handle this!" he screamed. "Go back in the house. Now!"

"You can't leave him there like this!" Mom shouted back.

"I said I'm handling it!" he snapped, then looked back down at me.

He crouched down to be closer to me.

"Listen to me, look at me!" he snapped again. It was hard for my eyes to focus, but I looked him in the eye and he continued. "Leave my daughter alone or next time, I won't be as nice. Now, get out of here before you upset them even more."

My father watched as I stood up, stumbling as I got to my feet. Every part of me wanted to go after him, but I knew it was no use. I definitely had a concussion and if I provoked him, he could do a lot more damage.

I looked back at the porch where Livi stood with our mother. She had mascara tear streaks down her face, but otherwise looked unharmed. Mom had an arm wrapped around her and wore a dejected expression as she watched me leave.

There was nothing I could do for Livi at that moment and I hated myself for it. I felt so pathetic, limping away injured after being completely blindsided. If I had been prepared, I could have taken my father down, but he had the element of surprise and that was everything.

My head hurt. I needed a hospital. So I slowly walked back to the car.

***

Wren Ridley

After moping around for a few more days, I had decided it was time for me to pay Landon a visit. An intentional one this time, not just running into him out and about with whoever. I needed to tell him what he needed, deserved, to hear and that wasn't going to get any easier if I waited any longer.

I loved him. I wanted him. And I needed to tell him that.

I drove over to his dorm, bringing the letter I wrote with me. I read over it again and again, making sure it said exactly what I needed it to. It had to be perfect so I could tell Landon exactly how I felt.

Someone opened the door to his dorm, so I made my way inside, reading the words under my breath as if that would help give me the nerve to say all

this.

I looked over the page again as I stood outside his door before I knocked and waited.

If he wasn't in his room, then this would be incredibly embarrassing, worse if his roommate was here or if he wouldn't let me in and I would have to say all this out in the hallway.

Kyle opened the door and I felt a spark of irritation. Of course, he had to be here when I was about to pour my heart out.

"Landon's not here," Kyle told me.

"Do you happen to know where he is?" I asked, trying to be polite, but my annoyance showed in my tone.

"No, and no, I don't know when he'll be back," Kyle said. "I'm on my way out. You can come in and wait for him if you want."

"That would be lovely," I replied, stepping into the room.

Kyle left shortly after that and I sat down at Landon's desk, placing the letter down and reading it over once again.

I pulled my phone out, debating on texting Landon to let him know I was here. He could have a bad reaction if he came back to his room and saw me here with no warning. But he could also decide not to come back if he knew I was here waiting for him.

When I went to open my texts, I got a phone call. It was Olivia, Landon's sister.

I sighed, debating on letting it just got to voicemail. Usually, I didn't like to answer phone calls because most conversations could just be text messages, but there was a possibility that Olivia was either with her brother or knew where he was, so I accepted the call.

"Hello, Olivia," I answered. "You wouldn't happen to know where your brother is, would you?"

"No, that's why I'm calling you," she replied. I could tell she was crying. She was blubbering so bad I could barely understand what she was saying.

"What's going on?" I asked, suddenly feeling anxious. Something had either happened to her and she couldn't get in contact with her brother, or something happened to him.

"My dad tricked Landon into coming here because he found out we were still talking," Olivia said. "And he... he..." Her voice cracked and she let out a sob before she could finish her thought.

"Olivia, breathe," I said, standing from the desk. "What happened?"

"My dad hurt Landon," she cried. "He punched him so many times. Landon was lying on the ground not moving. And then he got up and he didn't look good at all and now I don't know where he went. He could be passed out somewhere!"

There was a knot in my chest as I thought about Landon being passed out somewhere on the side of the road, bloody and bruised. My hand gripped my phone tighter and I let out a deep breath before responding to Olivia.

"Okay, Olivia, I need you to send me your address," I said as calmly as possible. My heart felt like it doubled in speed. I had never felt this much anxiety in my life. "I'm going to go pick you up and we're going to find your brother."

I would tear down the whole town just to find him.

"Okay, Wren, hurry!"

Olivia and I hung up and she immediately sent me the address. I was already out the door and in my car by the time I got the message.

I made it back to town quicker than I ever had. The ride there was silent, no music, no book, just me alone with my thoughts. All I could think about

was getting to Landon and holding him in my arms. I needed to know he was safe. I needed to *make sure* he was safe.

With what Olivia described, he could have a concussion. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility that he had passed out somewhere after leaving the house.

I had no plan on how I would get Olivia out of the house, assuming her father wasn't going to just let her walk out the front door, but I couldn't think too much about it. I would have to think of something in the moment.

When I got to the house, I parked my car out in the street and marched up the steps before knocking loudly on the door. I heard voices inside before a man opened the door, looking a little relieved when he saw that it was me. He probably expected the cops to be showing up at his door.

"Can I help you?" the man asked politely.

I wasn't even sure this was Landon's dad at first. He didn't look much like him, but then I saw his eyes. Those were Landon's eyes, only darker and crueler. But the resemblance was there.

I plastered on the best fake smile I could.

"Hi, yes, I'm so sorry for turning up so late, but I just moved into the neighborhood and I was looking to get involved in the church and heard you were the guy to talk to," I told him.

I was talking out of my ass. He looked a little confused, which was fine. All I needed was to buy some time for Olivia to get out of the house. Hopefully she heard me at the door.

"Yes, I would love to talk to you about the church, but now really isn't a good time," he replied with a strained smile, trying to remain polite.

"Oh, yes, I'm so sorry again about the late hour, but I was really hoping to talk to someone involved with the church. You see, I'm going through

something right now," I stopped short when I saw Olivia come down the stairs and stand behind her father.

"Wren!" she exclaimed. Way to blow my cover.

Olivia still looked teary eyed, but she was undoubtedly happy to see me. I saw the resemblance of her in her father. They had the same short nose and facial structure. Landon had taken after his mother, who was also now standing in the doorway.

Olivia's father turned to look at her.

"You know him?" he asked.

"Yes, and I'm leaving with him," she snapped, shooting daggers at her father.

He narrowed his eyes, grabbing her arm. "No, you are not."

I didn't think about it, I just swung my fist and got him right in the jaw. He was so shocked for a moment that Olivia was able to slip out of his grip. Before he could react, I punched him again, sending him staggering backwards.

"That first one was for your daughter," I seethed, leaning closer to him, glancing between him and his wife whose mouth gaped wide. "The second one was for your son."

His eyes widened then looked behind me at his daughter.

"Olivia, who is this?" he asked, his voice loud and commanding.

"Doesn't matter," I answered for her. "If you ever lay a hand on Landon again, you will wish you hadn't. You better hope he is alright because I am not a religious man, I will make your life hell by any means necessary if he's not."

He looked at me like I was crazy, which I guess I kind of was. I would make good on that promise and he seemed to realize that too.

"Olivia, you are not to leave with this man," he said. "Get back in the house now!"

"No!" Olivia screamed. "I'm going! And if you call the cops I'm going to tell them I ran away because you abuse me and my brother and I want nothing to do with you! Is that what you want? You want everyone at church to know how horrible you are? You want to get arrested?"

"Peter, just let her go," Olivia's mother said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Olivia motioned for me to follow her down the porch steps. I started at her father, who was glaring at me like just his stare could put me six feet under. Then the two of us got into my car.

"Do you know which way he was headed?" I asked her, starting to drive.

She started crying again, tears falling fast down her cheeks. She wiped them way.

"No, but he can't be far, just drive slow, and I'l try calling him."

We started our search, and I had a bad feeling we'd be searching for a while. I felt sick to my stomach and my knuckles throbbed from the punches I landed on their father.

I didn't care how much I ached or how long it would take. I would search all night if I had to.

I was going to find Landon. Even if I had to search all night or cross state lines, I would find him.

**

Thanks for reading!

52

Wren Ridley

Olivia was shaking her leg as she sat in the passenger seat of my car while we looked for Landon. The action reminded me of her brother, so much so that I actively tried to block her out of my vision. I got flashes of Landon sitting in that very seat, doing the very same thing while we looked for Olivia one time a while back. The tables had turned and the stakes were higher. Landon was out there alone and injured. Anything could happen to him if we didn't find him soon.

Driving around town seemed to be useless. We had no idea of how he had even gotten here. I drove around town slowly, thoroughly checking the streets, the sidewalks, looking into the woods and people's yards. We couldn't find him and it was making us both irritable and anxious.

"I think we should go check at the Hansons," Olivia had said, and so we did.

No one was home. All the lights were out and when I knocked on the door, no one came to answer it. I even walked around back to where Landon's bedroom was in the house and there were no signs that he was in there.

I eventually resorted to calling hospitals in the area to see if he, or anyone with his description, had been admitted.

"Hello, I'm just calling to see if someone named Landon Reilly has been admitted," I said to the third hospital. "I have reason to believe he would be seeking medical attention, but he has been unreachable for a couple hours now."

Generally, hospitals could give you a yes or no on if someone was there, but they wouldn't be able to tell me anything about his condition if he was actually at the hospital.

"We don't have a patient by that name," the person on the line said.

"If I give a description, can you tell me if any unidentified patients match?" I asked.

"We do not currently have any unidentified patients, but give me a description and we'll be on the look out."

So I gave her a description of Landon and left my number with her in case he turned up there.

I sighed, feeling discouraged, and I could tell Olivia was feeling the same. I leaned my head back on the headrest and closed my eyes, trying to wrack my brain for anywhere he might be.

"Now what?" Olivia cried, causing me to open my eyes and look at her. "He could be anywhere. He could be passed out. We need to call the police and tell them he's missing so they can search."

"Hold on, let me call one of his friends at school and see if he's there," I told her, grabbing my phone from the cupholder to call Jess.

Jess answered the phone after two rings.

"What's up?" she answered. I could tell she was at Stella's. Stella and James were arguing in the background.

"You haven't happened to hear from Landon within the last couple of hours, have you?" I asked, trying to keep my voice calm.

"Aren't you guys, like, not talking?" Jess asked, skeptical. "I can't tell you that."

"Jess, this is serious," I urged. "Something happened. I'm here with his sister and we can't find him."

"Wait, what?" Jess asked, sounding alarmed. "What happened?"

I didn't want to get into it with her. I had no idea how much Landon had actually told her about his life and I wasn't about to be the one to explain it all to her.

"Look, he's hurt and missing," I said as calmly as possible. "I need to know if you've talked to him."

"All he said was that something was going on at home and he needed a ride," Jess explained. "Chris Rojas from the hockey team let him borrow his car."

The name was familiar. Landon had mentioned him before. Chris Rojas was the captain of his hockey team, and apparently his friend.

"Can you give me his number?"

"Yeah, hold on, I'll text it to you."

Once I got the phone number, I called Chris. It rang for a while then eventually went to voicemail.

"Hello, Chris, this is Wren," I started. "I'm here with Landon's sister and we're both very worried because we can't find him, so if you could give me a call back and let me know if you've heard from him, that would be great. Thanks, bye."

I let out another long sigh and put my phone down in the cupholder before putting the car back in drive and pulling away from the curb.

"So now we have to just wait for this guy to call us back?" Olivia asked, looking at me with glossy eyes.

"I guess so," I said, gripping the steering wheel tightly. "What was even going on tonight? Why was he there?"

I needed more clarity on the situation and I couldn't bring Olivia back there if it wasn't safe. Olivia let out a frustrated groan, pulling at her hair.

"It's all my fault," she said, tears falling down her cheeks. "I wasn't being careful enough and stupid Jimmy found out that I had been talking to Landon and told my dad, so my dad took the iPod Landon gave me and texted Landon pretending to be me and tricked him into coming home to confront him."

"It's not your fault your father is a lunatic," I told her through gritted teeth.

It made me so angry that their father couldn't just let the two of them live. He had to have control over Olivia, just like he had to have control over Landon when he lived there. And now he was angry because he couldn't control Landon anymore, but he still tried.

"If I was just more careful, none of this would have happened," Olivia cried into her hands.

"Olivia, listen," I said, gaining her attention. "This isn't your fault. There is no one to blame for this but your father. We are going to find Landon and he's going to be fine. And I know for a fact that he doesn't blame you for any of this."

Olivia sniffled, wiping her face with her hands. I grimaced.

"I have napkins in the glovebox. Use them," I said.

She rolled her eyes, but did as I said anyway.

"Where are we going?" she asked after a few minutes.

" *You're* going to my house to stay there for the night," I said. "And I'm going to head back toward Providence to try to find your brother."

"No, I'm coming with you!" Olivia snapped, smacking her hand down on the console. "You can't bench me. I need to find my brother!"

"I can't take you to Providence with me. It's getting late and I have nowhere for you to stay there," I argued.

"I don't need anywhere to stay there because we are going to keep looking," she said, crossing her arms over her chest and looking at me like she was daring me to argue back.

I held back another sigh. It was like talking to my own younger sister.

"Listen, you will be the first person I call if I hear anything, okay?" I assured her.

I couldn't be driving around at odd hours of the night with a fifteen year old girl. If her parents actually did call the cops that would look all sorts of suspicious and I didn't want to get involved with that. At least this way she would have a safe place to stay and the cover of it seeming like a sleepover with Fawn.

"I have a sister your age, you know," I told her as she continued staring at me with her eyebrows raised. "You two are a lot alike. So hang out with her for a bit and I'll come back tomorrow, okay?"

"Fine," Olivia relented, looking down at her lap.

We were quiet for the rest of the ride to my house.

When we pulled up the driveway, most of the lights were out in the house. The living room light was off, but there was a bluish glow from the television. Fawn's bedroom was right above the living room and her light was still on.

"Come on," I said to Olivia as I shut the car off. I led her up the driveway and the porch steps before walking into the house.

I walked in the living room to see my parents both looking at the doorway with confused expressions.

"Oh, hello," Dad said with a wave, looking at Olivia.

Mom stood up from the couch and walked over to us.

"Is everything alright?" she asked, her confusion turning into concern.

"This is Olivia, she is going to have a sleepover with Fawn," I said before walking to the stairs. "Fawn! Come down here!"

Two sets of footsteps were heard above the living room and Fawn and Ava came out of the bedroom and stood at the top of the stairs.

"What are you even doing here?" Fawn questioned with a glare.

I motioned for Olivia to come to the stairs. She came to stand beside me. Well, she was actually standing a little behind me as if she was scared. I felt a little bad for her. She had a rough night, but I didn't know how to comfort her. I was hoping spending time with some girls her age would help her.

"I have a friend for you to add to your little get together, sound good?" I said.

Fawn's glare softened when she saw Olivia and she walked down the steps to meet us at the bottom.

"Sure, we have room for one more," she said, glancing at Olivia.

"Fawn, this is Olivia, Olivia this is Fawn," I introduced, slightly nudging Olivia toward the stairs.

"Wren," Olivia called out, looking back at me like she was wounded.

I put on what I hoped was a genuine smile for her.

"I'll be back tomorrow, I promise," I told her, squeezing her shoulder. "And I'll have your brother."

Olivia nodded and looked back toward Fawn who held out her hand to her.

"Come on, Ava and I were just about to watch a movie," Fawn said, grabbing Olivia's hand. "You can borrow some of my pajamas." And then Olivia was whisked off by my sister.

"Do you want to explain what's going on?" Mom asked, causing me to turn around and face her.

She wasn't angry, but by the look of her she was extremely concerned. Dad was too, but his concern always caused him to shut down a little.

"She just needs a place to stay for now," I said, walking toward her. "Her home situation isn't good."

"How do you know this girl?" Mom asked.

"She's Landon's sister," I replied, looking down at the floor. "Landon's missing."

My mom gasped and my eyes moved from the floor to her. She held a hand on her chest, her eyes wide.

"It's a long story, I'll tell you some other time," I rushed out, moving toward the door. "But I really have to go."

"Wren, honey, let us help," Mom said, grabbing my arm.

"You're helping by letting Olivia stay here," I said with a weak smile. "I'll be back tomorrow."

I dashed out of the house before she could say anything else. All my focus now was on finding Landon. Without Olivia, I could stay out longer and cover more ground without having to worry about getting arrested for kidnapping. Then once Landon was found, we could figure out what to do about Olivia's living situation. She couldn't stay there with such an abusive, violent man.

I started my car and backed out of the driveway, continuing my search for Landon.

***

Landon Reilly

My brain was swimming. The pain had reduced significantly since getting to the hospital, but my head still ached.

"I can't believe you drove all the way here with a concussion," Rojas said, shaking his head at me from the chair next to the hospital bed.

"The doctor said it's mild," I retorted. It was sort of embarrassing that it was only a mild concussion because it had been so painful in the moment. It was enough to make me dizzy and keep me from being able to fight back, but luckily the lasting damage wasn't severe.

"Still," Rojas replied. "That was stupid."

It was stupid on my part to drive all the way back to Providence before going to the hospital, but I clearly wasn't thinking straight; I had a brain injury.

"The doctor said I might not even have to stay overnight," I reminded him. "So, it's not that bad."

"She didn't say that you absolutely should have driven nearly forty minutes with a concussion to get here though."

"I needed to return your car anyway," I said and he just gave me a deadpanned look.

What really sucked about all this was that the doctor told me I couldn't use my phone for a little while, so I couldn't even check on Livi. I had left my phone in the car anyway. I had to have the hospital call Rojas, but I didn't expect him to stay here with me.

"Maybe you could've called and I could've figured out how to go pick you and my car up," Rojas replied after a moment.

I closed my eyes and leaned back in the hospital bed. In retrospect, I knew it wasn't smart to drive in my condition. But I didn't want to keep getting reprimanded by Rojas. I already felt like an idiot, plus I was in pain. The more I thought about anything, the more my head hurt.

"Alright, Landon, I'm going to send you home tonight as long as you have someone who can stay with you for the first twenty-four hours," Dr. Miller

said, causing me to open my eyes and sit up.

I hadn't even heard her walk in the room. Rojas was still sitting beside me, his attention on the doctor.

"I can stay with him," Rojas said. "Should I be waking him up every few hours?"

Dr. Miller shook her head. "That's not necessary. If he can sleep, it's best to let him rest and see if there are any new symptoms when he wakes up."

"So, how long do I have to rest?" I asked her. I wanted to be able to get back to Livi as soon as possible.

"You should be resting for at least forty-eight hours," she said. "You shouldn't be doing anything that can worsen your symptoms, so no being on your phone, no school work, no hockey. After forty-eight hours you can gradually start going back to normal and use your phone for ten to fifteen minutes at a time and go back to school. Hockey will have to be put on pause until we can reassess you."

"What about driving?" I asked her.

"You shouldn't be driving within that forty-eight hours either," Dr. Miller replied. "I know you've already broken that rule, but you absolutely cannot drive for the next forty-eight hours. After that, you can start with short distances and gradually go longer."

"Well, he doesn't have a car, so I don't think that'll be an issue," Rojas said, sending me a pointed look. I shrunk a little in the bed, crossing my arms over my chest.

Dr. Miller gave me some instructions for the next forty-eight hours and gave me a date to come back and be reassessed before she processed my discharged and I could leave.

It wasn't until Rojas and I were alone in his car that he started asking me question that I in no way wanted to answer.

"So, are you going to tell me what this is all about?" he asked as he started the car. "I mean, you went to go check on your sister and came back with a concussion, so that's pretty concerning."

It was too embarrassing to tell Rojas what had actually happened. My father got me by surprise and took me down. I should have been able to take him. If I had been better prepared, there was no way he would have won that fight, but I was too blinded by my concern for my sister to see the trap that was laid out for me until it was too late. Now Livi was at home with our violent father. The only thing keeping me from going crazy was knowing that he wouldn't hurt her.

"I really don't want to talk about it," I said, closing my eyes and leaning my head back on the head rest.

Rojas pulled out of the parking lot and started toward campus.

"Did somebody do this to you?" Rojas asked after a few moments. "Did somebody deliberately hurt you?"

"Dude," I said with a sigh. "This is too much for my brain right now."

Rojas laughed and shook his head, but he stopped with the questions. For now at least.

When we got back to my dorm, Rojas followed me up to my room like was actually planning on spending the night with me. We entered my room and I turned to face him once the door was shut.

"You don't actually have to stay here all night," I told him. He looked at me like I was crazy.

"Your doctor said you needed someone with you for the first twenty-four hours," he reminded me. "Are you forgetful? Is this a new symptom that I need to tell her about."

I rolled my eyes, which actually kind of hurt and made me regret doing it.

"I know what she said, but I don't need you to watch me," I told him. "My roommate will be here."

"He's not here right now," he said, looking around the room. "I can leave when he gets here, assuming he's not going to be out all night or come back drunk."

I didn't answer that. I just turned around and sat down at my desk, putting my head in my hands, trying to soothe the pain.

"Ah, shoot, I forgot my phone in the car," Rojas said, patting his pockets. "I'll be right back. You better let me back in."

"Yeah, yeah," I said, squinting at him. I was pretty sure I left my phone in his car too, but it was no use getting it since I couldn't even use it. He would probably withhold it from me anyway.

I lifted my head up from my hands and looked down at my desk. For the first time since coming back to my room, I noticed a folded piece of paper sitting on my desk, one I was sure hadn't been there before. I was too curious to ignore it, so I picked it up and unfolded it.

The first thing I notice was that the words on the page were in Wren's handwriting. It was definitely against the rules given to me by the doctor to be reading during this first forty-eight hours, but there was nothing that could keep me from reading what was written on this piece of paper. I couldn't live with only being able to imagine what Wren had said in this letter. It would tear me apart and cause me to think more than my brain could handle at the moment.

Holding this paper in my hand gave me a shred of hope, like Wren would finally be telling me what I wanted to hear. I let myself think about it for a moment too long and part of me felt dread that he was telling me that he was completely done with me. I couldn't handle that, but I couldn't handle not knowing either. So I started reading.

Dear Landon,

I wish my mouth could speak these words because you deserve to hear them, but for now, I must write them down. This way, I cannot hide what I want to say. It is cowardly of me to have to hide behind this paper to tell you what I really feel, but I will do it so that I can't back out and so I can say what I need to without it being messed up or misconstrued.

I told you love wasn't for me, and that was true to an extent, but it had nothing to do with you. Love scares me, but you already know that. I am insecure and so afraid of losing the love given to me that I decided to avoid it instead of opening myself to it. I know I come off as someone who is arrogant and confident, but I'm really just so afraid of being unwanted. To be unwanted by you would be my greatest failure.

I'm sorry that I couldn't reciprocate what you said to me that day and that I made you feel small. I hate myself for that. I'm sorry that you were vulnerable and instead of reassuring you and returning those feelings, I shut down and pushed you away. You have become so open with me and it was unacceptable of me to try to close you up just to make myself more comfortable. I hope that you can forgive me for that.

What I really need to say to you is: I love you.

I love you. I have loved you for so long that I can't even remember when I started. I have loved you since before I knew to call it love. You consume my every waking thought. You consume my dreams. This love has manifested in many ways before either of us knew what we were feeling.

It's in the way I get more winded when we go running together like your presence is what takes my breath away. It's in the way I sleep better when you're beside me. The way I miss you when you're away for a game and the way I watch every one of them just for a glimpse of you. It's the way I feel sick at the thought of anything bad ever happening to you and the way I would shield you from anyone trying to hurt you. It's in the way your happiness is like a drug to me. Seeing you smile gives me purpose. It's addicting and all I need to keep going is to see it. It's in the way your eyes pull me in and make it so hard to look away. And the way when we're apart, I can't function.

The thought of a life without you terrifies me. I love you now and I will love you as long as I breathe. I will love you in darkness and in light, as long as the sun burns and the stars shine. You have me however you want me.

I promise to love you and make sure that you know it. I will love you entirely with my whole being.

I am yours forever, if you will have me.

If you will not have me, it will break my heart, but my heart is yours anyway.

Love, Wren

My eyes stung as I processed what I had just read. It was overwhelming to think that someone loved me in that way, but I understood it because it was the exact way I felt about him. I wanted to call him and I didn't care how stupid it might be to go crawling back to him just because of this letter. We loved each other and it made no sense to stay apart.

If I had a chance to have Wren here, then I would take it. I wanted him here, to be wrapped in his arms, to have his help with what was going on with Livi.

Rojas knocked on the door a moment later. I jumped up from my desk and answered the door. I was about to tell him to call Wren for me, but he held up his hand. His other hand held his phone up to his ear.

"Sorry I missed your call earlier," Rojas said to whoever he was talking to. "Landon's here at his dorm."

"Who is it?" I questioned. It could only be one of two people: Wren or Livi.

Rojas shook his head at me.

"I'm not sure that's necessary, I'll be here with him," Rojas said. Whoever was on the phone said something and then Rojas took the phone away from his ear to look at the screen, seeing they had hung up.

"Well, who was it?" I asked.

"It was Wren," he told me. "Fair warning, I think he's on his way here."

"He is?"

My heart started beating faster in my chest.

"I can tell him to go if you don't want him here," Rojas offered.

"No!" I quickly replied, clutching the letter tightly in my hand. "No, he can stay."

"Okay..."

We were still standing in the doorway when Wren walked into the suite, his eyes wide and looking wild as they landed on me. He pushed past Rojas and stood in front of me, keeping a slight distance, unsure of what to do.

"You're alright?" he asked, his voice small.

I nodded, then without thinking too much about it, I pulled him to me and buried my face in his neck. Wren threw his arms around me, putting a hand on my head and holding me tight.

I didn't know how long we stood there, but it must have been a significant amount of time because Rojas cleared his throat, breaking us apart.

"You need to go lie down," Rojas said to me before turning to Wren. "I can go over some care instructions with you if you're going to be the one staying here."

"Go get ready for bed," Wren said to me, kissing my cheek.

And I listened because I loved him and he loved me.

And also because my head hurt.

**

Thanks for reading! Almost at the end!

53

Wren Ridley

I watched Landon closely as he got dressed for bed, like I was afraid he would topple over if I took my eyes off him for even a second. His friend Chris had given me the rundown on what the doctor had said to him and then left the two of us alone. Landon needed to rest for forty-eight hours, and I was going to make sure he got as much rest as he needed. He could take pain relievers every four to six hours if he needed them and he could use cold compress for the bruising on his face if that was bothering him.

The relief I felt at seeing him without more serious injuries was so overwhelming I felt like I could barely keep myself standing. The dark bruising on his face which made me clench my fists thinking about how it got there. I had half a mind to go back to his parents' house and deck his father again. The only reason I wouldn't was because Landon needed me here with him now, and that was more important to me.

While Landon changed for bed, I reluctantly took my eyes off him to make sure he would be comfortable. I fluffed his pillows and straightened out his comforter, moving some clothes he had left on the bed over to his desk. The blanket my parents gave him for Christmas was underneath the comforter.

Landon placed a hand on my shoulder as I fussed with his blanket.

"Wren," he said quietly, causing me to turn my head to face him.

"Ready for bed?" I asked, a weak smile on my face.

"In a minute," Landon replied. "I want to talk."

I shook my head at him and started moving him toward the bed.

"You need rest. We can talk about everything when you're feeling better," I assured him.

"Wren, I—"

"Landon," I stopped him, placing my hands on his shoulders and looking him right in the eye. "You need rest. All of your energy needs to be used for your recovery. I'm sorry and I promise you we can talk about everything in a few days after you're well rested."

I kissed his forehead and gestured for him to get in bed. He obliged, begrudgingly. Landon got into bed and lied down right next to the wall, looking at me expectantly.

"Do you need anything?" I asked him. "Do you want ice for your face?"

He ignored my questions. "Aren't you going to get in bed?"

My chest ached a little at his question. He looked so tired and sad and he moved all the way over so I would fit. I wanted to give him all the affection in the world, but I couldn't get in bed with him.

"I don't want to injure you any more," I told him softly.

"You don't move around when you sleep, it'll be fine," he argued.

I leaned forward on the bed, moving Landon's hair off his forehead. My hand traveled from his hair to his cheek to caress it.

"Please just get some rest," I urged him. "Please." I had never said please so much in my life, but I was desperate.

"Fine," he grumbled, moving toward the middle of the bed and shooting me a glare.

I backed away from him and turned the light off before going to sit at his desk chair, facing the bed. Landon's eyes were closed, but I could tell that he was awake with his mind wandering, which was the exact opposite of what it should have been doing. There wasn't much we could do about that though.

It wasn't like I could force him to stop thinking. I couldn't even do that for myself. I was awake more than half the night, worried something would happen if I wasn't keeping an eye on him. By the time he woke up in the morning, I was already awake and watching him, having barely slept at all.

"Sleep okay?" I asked him. Landon rubbed his eyes and stared at me for a moment without saying anything.

"Looks like you didn't," he said, looking upset.

I waved him off like it was nothing. I was at the point where I was feeling over tired, so instead of feeling groggy, I felt wired.

"I slept just fine," I lied with a smile.

He didn't need to know that I spent most of the night checking on him, which felt necessary at the time, but looking back on it seemed more creepy than anything.

"How are you feeling?" I asked before he could say anything else or call out my lie. "Are you in pain? Do you need some pain reliever?"

"Wren, I'm fine," Landon assured me, moving to get out of bed.

I stood up, putting my hands out to stop him.

"What are you doing?" I asked, slightly alarmed.

"Going to take a piss, that alright with you?" he asked, clearly irritated with me. He bumped my shoulder as he passed by.

While he was in the bathroom, I made his bed and picked out clothes from his closet for him to wear for the day.

Jess should have been on her way. I had reached out to her last night to see if she would spend some time with Landon today while I went back home to get Olivia. I made sure to text Olivia last night so that she knew I was with Landon and he was safe. I also promised her that I would bring her

here to see him, but I didn't want to drag him along for that when he needed rest.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you," Landon said softly when he came back into the room, leaning against the door.

"That's quite alright, darling," I replied, pulling a pair of pants from his dresser. "Why don't you get changed? Jess should be here any minute."

Landon looked confused, raising his eyebrows at me as he took in his freshly made bed. He walked over to it, taking the pants from my hand and changing into them. He then took the shirt I had laid out on the bed and quickly changed into that.

"Why is Jess coming?" he asked, throwing his used clothes in the hamper.

"I need to go pick up your sister," I told him.

"That doesn't explain why Jess is coming."

"It has not been twenty-four hours since you sustained a concussion," I explained, slowly. "The doctor said you needed someone with you for the first twenty-four hours."

Landon rolled his eyes. "Why are you picking Livi up anyway?"

"It's a long story, but she's worried and wants to see you and I promised her I would come back for her today anyway."

"Come back for her? You saw Livi last night?"

I nodded, but before I could explain anything else, Jess was knocking on the door. I opened the door for her and she went right past me to Landon, setting down the bags of breakfast she brought to give him a tight hug.

"I'm so glad you're alright," Jess said with her face against his shoulder.

Landon patted her on the back, looking over her shoulder at me with an unreadable expression.

"Thanks Jess," he said as she pulled away. "But I don't need a babysitter."

"I'm not babysitting," she said, picking up one of the bags of food she left on the desk. "We're hanging out. I brought breakfast."

His expression softened at that and he took the bag she offered him.

"I'll be back in a little bit with Olivia," I assured him. He looked at me and nodded. "Jess, you'll call me if anything happens?"

"Yes, yes, I'll call," she said with a chuckle. "But we'll be fine."

I gave Landon one last look before going toward the door. He stood up and stopped me abruptly as I was about to walk out. When I turned to face him, I was met with his lips on mine. I melted into him, let my lips linger on his until he pulled away. When I looked in his eyes, I wanted so badly to tell him that I loved him, but it wasn't the right time. I needed to tell him with all the words I really wanted to say, when we had more time, and when we didn't have an audience.

I smiled at him before I left the room and headed out to my car. It took a few minutes for my car to warm up and for the windshield to defrost. I wished I had started it up beforehand because now I was so anxious to get back to Landon that my patience was thin.

Once I could see out the windshield, I started back toward my dorm to get changed and brush my teeth. James was still asleep when I got there, so I was uninterrupted and quickly in and out. I pulled on the hockey sweatshirt Landon had given me for Christmas before leaving the room. When I got back in the car, I let Olivia know I was on my way and started toward home.

Mom was instantly at the door when I pulled into the driveway. She looked at me with worry, placing a hand on my back and guiding me toward the couch.

"Honey, you look exhausted," she said, sitting us both down.

"I'm fine," I assured her, though she didn't look convinced.

"Are you?" she asked, raising her eyebrows in disbelief. "How's Landon?"

"He has a minor concussion, but he'll be okay."

"Thank goodness it's not more serious," she said. "Listen, your father and I are extremely concerned about Olivia. We cannot in good conscience send her back home."

"What did she say?"

"She told us about her mother starving her and locking her in her room for hours so she couldn't eat," Mom said, her voice low. "She told us about her father abusing Landon, hitting him, screaming at him, making him run so much until he threw up."

My blood ran ice cold hearing that. Of course, I knew that his father had been abusive toward him. He had told me those things. But hearing them again, especially after what his father had just done to him made me so angry.

"She's not going back there," I said, letting out a deep breath. "I have to talk to Landon about the Hansons. They're the family that took him in after he left his parents. They'll help."

Three sets of footsteps came scurrying down the stairs and into the living room a moment later. Olivia immediately threw herself down on the couch next to me and wrapped her arms around me, resting her head on my shoulder.

"Wren!" she exclaimed.

I slowly moved my arm to go around her and patted her on the back, unsure of what else to do.

"Landon's really okay?" she asked, looking at me with wide eyes.

"He's alright," I assured her. "He just needs to rest."

"Can we go see him now?"

"Why don't you eat some breakfast before you go, Livi?" Mom suggested. "Leo's making pancakes in the kitchen."

Olivia smiled and stood up from the couch.

"Sounds yummy!" she said, walking past me to give my mom a hug. "Thanks, Vanessa."

Olivia left the living room to meet Fawn, Ava, and Dad in the kitchen.

"You look like you need to eat too," Mom said to me after a moment. "And get some caffeine in you."

"Yeah, I probably should."

The two of us stood up from the couch and went into the kitchen with the others. My brother Colt was sitting alone at the kitchen table, headphones in as he watched something on his phone with his plate in front of him. He looked at me and nodded, but that was all the greeting I got.

The three girls sat at the kitchen island, Fawn in the middle of Olivia and Ava.

"You look like you've been hit by a truck," Fawn said to me.

"Rude," Dad commented as he flipped a pancake on the stove.

I sat down across from Fawn, placing my head in my hand. Mom came over and placed a coffee in front of me, already having made it how I liked it.

Olivia and Ava giggled beside my sister.

"I take it you three are getting along just fine?" I asked, my eyes sweeping over the three of them.

Olivia seemed to fit right in with Fawn and Ava. The three of them sat close, whispering to each other and giggling. Olivia seemed at ease despite

the stress she was under last night. It was like the three of them had been friends for years rather than just one night.

"I'm a very good sleepover host, of course we're getting along," Fawn replied, taking a sip of her coffee.

"Your family is actually really cool," Olivia added. "And Ava, of course."

Dad finished cooking breakfast and gave us each a plate with pancakes on it. I devoured my plate in a minute, the three girls across from me looking at me like I was some sort of beast.

"You just inhaled that," Ava said with a laugh.

Dad turned away from the counter with his own plate, then looked down at my now empty one.

"Well, I can make more if you're that hungry," he said, about to hand his plate over to me.

I shook my head, standing from my seat. I took the plate and rinsed it off before putting it in the dishwasher. Then I went to the bathroom and tried to make myself look less like I had been hit by a truck. The coffee and the food helped a little, but I still looked pale and had bags under my eyes. I splashed cold water on my face and put some through my hair to tame it. That was about all I could do.

By the time I was done in the bathroom, Olivia was done with breakfast and ready to go. Fawn had given her some clothes to borrow and she had a bag of her clothes from last night in her hand.

"Ready to go?" she asked with a hopeful smile.

"Yeah, let me just say bye to my parents," I told her.

We each said our goodbyes. My mother pulled me into a tight hug.

"Drive safe, honey," she said in my ear. "And be strong. I know you're under a lot of stress right now, but we're here to help."

With that, we left the house. Olivia threw her clothes in the backseat before getting into the passenger seat. Her leg with shaking before we even left the driveway. I decided not to comment on it.

"Thanks for bringing me here last night," Olivia said as I started backing out. "It was nice hanging out with Fawn and Ava and not having to worry about anything I said getting back to my parents."

"Your friends tell your parents what you say?"

"Their parents do," she clarified. "And Jimmy does apparently."

I nodded.

"And your parents are, like, the best," Olivia continued.

"Yeah, they are," I agreed, tapping my hand on the steering wheel.

"I'm really glad you're with my brother," she said softly, which caused my stomach to twist in pain for a moment.

"We're not—"

Olivia put her hand up to stop me.

"You don't have to try to come up with some excuse," she said. "I've known you two were together without either of you saying it. You're not good at being subtle."

There was really nothing I could say to that, so I said nothing.

***

Landon Reilly

Jess grabbed the chair from Kyle's desk and sat down at my desk with me to eat the breakfast sandwiches she brought. I still wasn't that thrilled about having a babysitter, but I was somewhat happy to have her here anyway. I

was so confused with all the emotions I was feeling and I couldn't talk about any of it with Wren.

"Did you sleep okay?" Jess asked, pulling the chair closer to the desk.

"Yeah, I slept fine," I told her. "I have a lot on my mind."

"Not a good thing right now," she said with a laugh. "But I get it. I was worried sick about you last night. When Wren called me I was running a bunch of crazy scenarios through my head."

"He called you?"

"Well, yeah, he was looking for you with your sister," she said, pausing to take a bite of her sandwich. "He called to see if I knew where you were, so I gave him Chris's phone number because I figured if anyone knew where you were it would be him since you had his car. So I assume he called Chris after that."

"Yeah, he did," I said with a sigh. "Rojas was with me at the hospital and he brought me back here and Wren came after."

"So are things good with you and Wren or no?" she asked. "I can't really tell."

"I can't either," I replied.

Wren didn't know I read his letter. He had no idea that I knew exactly how he felt about me, so I had no idea what he actually thought was going on with us at this moment. I knew I wanted to be back with him, but he was still treading lightly.

"You know how things went down with us," I started after a moment. Jess nodded. "Well, I came here last night and Rojas forgot his phone in the car, so he went out to get it. I found a letter on my desk from Wren."

"Like a love letter?" Jess asked excitedly, grinning ear to ear.

"Yeah, exactly."

I didn't want to tell her exactly what was in the letter or let her read it. That letter was personal and meant to be read only by me. The only people who should know the contents of the letter are me and him. It was more special that way.

"That's so romantic!" Jess exclaimed, putting a hand on her chest. "So you two are back together?"

"He doesn't know I read it," I admitted. "He didn't want to talk about anything last night. He was too paranoid about my head."

"Which is understandable," she responded. "But he doesn't know? He hasn't mentioned it?"

"He hasn't mentioned anything," I said, resting my head in my hand. "I'm not even sure he meant to leave the letter here. It was kinda just thrown down on the desk. It wasn't like it was placed there for me to find."

"Okay, so he somehow got in here hoping to find you to give it to you and then left it here by accident?"

"Possibly?" I wasn't really sure how it happened, but I knew Wren didn't leave that letter here on purpose.

It wasn't too long after that conversation that there was a knock on the door. Jess got up to answer it and Livi came rushing in with Wren behind her. I barely had time to stand before Livi was clinging to me, wrapping her arms around my neck so tightly they could have been permanently stuck there.

"I'm so glad you're okay," Livi cried into my shirt.

"I'm alright," I replied, wrapping my arms around her.

"Hey, hey," Wren called out. "Be careful."

Livi let go of me and backed up, her eyes a little watery as she looked at me.

"I'm not that fragile," I said, fixing a glare on him. He looked exhausted, so my glare immediately softened and I started to feel guilty that he clearly let his worry for me keep him from resting.

Because he loves me.

"I was so worried about you," Livi said, taking my attention away from Wren. "We were looking for you for a couple hours and I was freaking out when we could't find you."

"And you're alright?" I asked her, looking her over. She seemed fine. "Dad didn't do anything to you?"

"I didn't stay at home last night. I stayed at Wren's house with his sister," she explained.

My eyes shot over to Wren, who was trying to keep himself busy by tidying up but clearly still listening to the conversation. Jess moved away from the door and came back to sit at the desk.

"Wren came to get me and he punched Dad in the face! *Twice!* It was awesome," Livi continued with a wide grin.

I looked at Livi briefly before glancing back at Wren. This was the first time I noticed his bruised knuckles on his right hand. I felt even more guilty that I hadn't noticed before.

Wren looked up from what he was doing and looked right into my eyes. I was overwhelmed with emotion and love for him at that moment. The way he cared for my sister when I couldn't, how he made sure she was safe before coming back to me showed his love more than words ever could. I felt sort of foolish because Wren had always shown how much he cared, had shown his love, but I was so hung up on hearing him say the words that I got angry with him for not saying them instead of trying to understand him.

So he hadn't said the words then, but he showed me love through his actions. He wrote them down in a beautiful letter. I was oddly okay with

that.

And despite everything that was going on, I was happy.

I had Jess, one of my closest friends, here. I had Livi. And I had Wren. That was all I needed to be happy.

***

Despite the doctor saying I only needed to be monitored for twenty-four hours, Wren stayed with me for three days and brought me to my follow up appointment. My head was healing nicely and I could start gradually going back to normal. However, Wren was still worried I would miraculously become brain dead if he didn't have eyes on me at all times.

In the afternoon on that third day, Wren was driving me to the Hansons's house. Yesterday, I had called them to let them know of the situation with Livi and now we were going to their house to try to figure out what we could do to get her away from our parents.

Wren was still unwilling to talk about anything concerning the two of us, which I couldn't really blame him for even if it irritated me. We had a lot of other things to talk about with everything going on. It seemed like anything else was paling in comparison to what we were dealing with.

An audiobook was playing as we made the drive. It was the very same one we had already been listening to together. We picked up right where we left off. It felt good that he hadn't gone ahead without me while we were apart.

Wren paused the book when we got to the Hansons's house and the two of us got out of the car. I was nervous about what was going to happen. I knew the Hansons would want to help, but I hated adding more to their plate. They had already helped me so much and now I was going to be basically begging them to help my sister out too.

Wren must have sensed my nerves, so he placed a hand on my lower back and led me toward the house. His touch comforted me as we walked up the porch steps and knocked on the front door.

Matthew answered the door almost instantly, pulling me toward him in a hug.

"You know you don't have to knock," Matthew said, patting my back before releasing me.

I felt so at ease in the embrace of Matthew Hanson. He and his wife, Anne, truly did save me from a horrible fate. They brought me into their home, treated me like their own, and never made me feel bad about it. I owed them so much and I was about to owe them even more if they took in Livi.

Matthew greeted Wren as Anne popped into the entryway, motioning for us to come in and shut the door.

"Oh, Landon," she said, pulling me in for a hug. "I'm so sorry you're going through all this."

The four of us went into the dining room and sat down. Wren and I sat next to each other, across from Matthew and Anne.

"Landon, sweetie, you should have called us if you thought anything was going on with your sister," Anne said, concern in her tone. "We would have helped."

"I know," I muttered in response. "I just hate to burden you with more of my problems."

"It's not a burden," Anne replied. "You have never been a burden to us."

I would probably end up crying at some point if we kept talking like this. Wren placed his hand on my upper thigh underneath the table, and I was so glad to have him there with me, to not have to face any of this alone.

"Do you have any ideas about getting Olivia into your care?" Wren asked, looking between the two of them.

"We'll have to go to the police," Matthew said, placing a hand down on the table. "With Landon it was a little easier because his parents weren't trying to keep him there, but with Olivia that's not the case. We need to go to the

police with some sort of evidence to show that her parents aren't fit to take care of her and see if we can foster her for the time being until we can get more permanent things arranged."

"We expect they'll fight us on it," Anne added. "So it won't be easy, but Olivia could help. If she tells the police, the social workers, the judge that she doesn't feel safe with them and would rather be placed with us, that could help a lot. She's at that age where they'll take her wishes into consideration."

"What if it doesn't work?" I asked, my voice shaking. "What if we go to the police and they don't do anything?"

"Then we come up with something else," Matthew replied with a sad smile. "There's no way to know how all of this is going to go. In a perfect world, it would go exactly how we expect it to, but we just can't really be sure."

"I... I can't thank you guys enough for helping with this," I said, looking down at the table, overwhelmed with gratitude.

Anne grabbed my hand from across the table.

"Landon, you're family," she said. "You don't need to thank us."

We were interrupted by a loud bang on the front door. We all looked around at each other, confused. Then there was more banging on the door. Matthew stood up from his seat and marched over to the front door.

Dread filled me when he opened the door and I heard an all too familiar voice screaming at him.

"I know it was you!" my father screamed. "I know it was you!"

"What are you talking about?" Matthew asked. "Quiet down and tell me what this is about."

"Care to explain why the police were at my door this morning interrogating me?" His voice boomed throughout the house.

"Peter, I have no idea why the police were at your house this morning," Matthew told him. "So, why don't you calm down?"

"Stop lying to me," my father snapped. "You either called them or you're helping Landon. You meddled with one of my kids and now you're doing it with another. They're *my kids* ."

I stood up from the table and started making my way to the front door. Wren grabbed my arm before I could leave the dining room. I looked back at him and he just shook his head at me.

"Let me do this," I whispered. "I need to do this." I leaned in and kissed his cheek before pulling myself out of his grasp and leaving the room.

When I walked into my father's view, his wild eyes landed on me, practically piercing through my skin. The bruise from what I assumed was Wren's punch was still visible, but fading.

"What a nice surprise," he sarcastically remarked. "I knew you must be involved with this."

"We are not your kids," I said to him in a low tone as I walked closer. "We are not *your* anything."

"You might not be, but your sister is."

"My sister wants to leave, and you're going to let her," I said, trying to keep my voice even and strong.

My father stepped into the house, pushing past Matthew as Matthew tried to hold him back. It was no use. He walked right through Matthew and stood toe to toe with me.

"You have struck my last nerve," he spat. "I thought we had been over this, but clearly our last encounter wasn't enough to get it through your head that you are to cease all contact with your sister."

"I don't care what you have to say," I replied, squaring my shoulders. "I care about Olivia."

I wasn't going to let him intimidate me. This time I wasn't going to be blindsided. I was ready for whatever he threw at me.

"She doesn't need you to care about her," he replied with a sinister smile. "You are *nothing* . There is nothing you can do for her."

He was wrong and he was beginning to see it. He was only acting so crazy because he knew Livi couldn't stand him, that she wanted to be rid of him and Mom just as much as they wanted to be rid of me. He couldn't stand that his perfect children didn't turn out the exact way he wanted them, and he was beginning to realize Livi wasn't his perfect little princess anymore.

"You're only so angry because you've finally realized you've failed both of your kids," I snapped at him. "Livi and I need each other more than we ever needed you."

His eyes bugged out of his head so he looked nearly unrecognizable.

" *You* are the one who failed *me!"* he screamed, pointing his finger at me and then at his chest. "I gave you everything! I set you up for success and you failed! If you had just done what I asked of you, if you had gone to the therapy instead of fighting it things would be different! You would still have a home. I would still love you."

I scoffed, shaking my head. "You never loved me. Or Livi. You love what ever version of us you have conjured in your head."

He stepped closer to me, clearly letting his anger fuel his body. He was where I got my anger problems from and I hated him and myself for it.

"You don't like to hear it, but you're not the father that you think you are," I continued before he could get another word in. "You wanted to live vicariously through me more than you loved me. It was never that you wanted *me* to succeed. It was that any success I had felt like success for you. And you know what? I'm so glad that I don't have to have anything to do with you anymore. You made my life miserable! Now I get to be the real *me!* Not just some version of you."

"You sound ridiculous," he snarled at me.

"And another thing, I never felt any love from you, but I sure as fuck feel it from my boyfriend. And knowing how much you would hate the fact that your perfect Christian son is in love with a man makes it even better."

That had struck a nerve with my father. He reached for me, trying to pull me toward him, but somebody grabbed my shoulders and pulled me away from him. I turned slightly and saw Wren out of the corner of my eye. If I thought my father was angry to see me, he was downright livid to see Wren standing beside me.

"Where have you taken my daughter?" my father snapped at Wren, all his fury now directed at him.

I moved forward, putting Wren slightly behind me.

"She's safe from *you* because of him," I said, pointing a finger at him.

"This is it, huh? You had your little boyfriend come to the house and kidnap your sister?"

My father moved fast toward Wren, his hand outstretched like was going to grab him, but I moved faster. I put myself in front of Wren and lunged at my father, bringing my fist back and hitting him hard.

My knuckles screamed at the impact, but it was worth it. Blood leaked from his nose as he stumbled back, bringing his hands up to his face.

"Don't touch him," I snapped, slightly nudging Wren further behind me.

My father glared at me with so much hatred that it felt like he was hoping hell fire would start raining on me. I didn't care about that though. I finally didn't care about what he thought, about what he had to say about me and the life I was living. He was pathetic and I was done letting him be in my head.

Wren came to stand beside me just as the police pulled up to the house. We all turned to stare as the officer made his way up to the open front door.

Anne came forward and spoke to the officer, pointing at my father.

"Sir, you're being asked to leave the property," the officer said to him.

My father was seething. Steam was practically coming out of his ears he was so angry, but he walked out of the house and the officer walked him to his car. He looked at me from his car, his face like a declaration of war. He wasn't going to let Livi go without a fight, but for her, it was a fight I was willing to have.

Wren pulled me close to him and turned as around, shielding me from the dark stare of my father.

"I called because I knew things were going to end badly if we didn't get him out of here," Anne said to us. She stepped forward and pulled me into a hug. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I said, my voice like gravel. I was sweating, still feeling anxious. "I need to call Livi."

Anne and Wren let go of me and I went into another room to call my sister. She picked up on the fourth ring, laughing at something someone said to her.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Where are you right now?" I asked. "Dad just came to the Hansons raging because I guess the police went to the house this morning and questioned him. He thinks Matthew or me called them. He's furious right now."

"I'm at Fawn's and I called them," she said.

"So– wait, what?" I asked. " *You* called them?"

"Yeah, I called them and dropped off some evidence I had."

"Evidence? What evidence?"

"I had some recordings of conversations, my diet plan and calorie tracker, text messages," she listed. "I just really don't want anyone making me go back there, so I thought I'd be thorough."

"Yeah, that's probably a good thing."

I was stunned, and a little guilty, that Livi had gone and done this on her own. But mostly I was proud that she was advocating for herself. She was a lot braver than I ever was.

"I'll talk to you later, okay? We're about to go to the mall," Livi said after a few moments.

"Alright, have fun," I said. "Love you."

"Love you too!"

I walked back into the room, staring at my phone with a stunned expression.

"What's wrong?" Wren asked, immediately at my side.

"It was Livi," I said quietly, still staring at my phone. "Livi called the police. That's why they questioned him this morning."

Wren didn't look surprised.

"You knew?" I wondered, training my eyes on him.

He shook his head. "No, but I'm not surprised. Your sister is smart."

I nodded in agreement, looking down at my phone again before putting it in my pocket. Wren stared at me for a moment before reaching his hand out for mine.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go for a drive."

All the tension left my body after saying goodbye to the Hansons and leaving the house. Sitting in Wren's passenger seat, I felt at ease, putting the events of the day behind me.

We were silent for the first part of our drive, Wren reaching over and putting his hand on my thigh. I appreciated him so much in that moment. He knew I had to get out of the house and cool down, clear my head. He knew exactly what I needed. He always did.

Wren pulled up to a drive through, getting an order of fries and a soda for each of us. We drove for a while until I noticed he was bringing me somewhere specific, somewhere familiar.

He pulled up to the beach, the same one he had brought me to before when I needed to calm down and get out of my own head. He parked the car and started eating his fries as I ate my own. It was a few moments later that he cleared his throat, gaining my attention.

"I know a lot went on today, so if you don't want to talk, I understand–"

"I do," I cut him off. "I do want to talk."

I wanted it more than anything at that moment. I had been waiting for this and I wouldn't be able to continue to function until we had this conversation.

Wren nodded, pressing his lips together.

"Wren, I–"

"Can I start, please?" he asked, his voice small.

I just nodded, urging him to continue. He cleared his throat again, looking me in the eyes, then started speaking.

"I have so much to say to you and I don't know where to start," he said with a self-deprecating laugh. "I have so many insecurities and I just try to bury them because it makes me so uncomfortable to feel out of control, to feel like I'm not sure of myself. It's easier for me to bury them and pretend they're not there than to actually confront them."

He looked down for a moment, running a finger over the center console between us.

"I've always felt hard to love because I was weird or nerdy or because I did or said mean things without knowing why I was doing it," he continued, looking back at me. "Mostly with Fox, but with my other siblings too or kids at school. Maybe it was because I thought if I made people not like me because of my own actions, it would hurt less than if they didn't like me all on their own. But as I got older, I hated myself for it. I want to be liked, loved, needed."

Wren paused, gathering his thoughts. My heart was aching for him. I just wanted to pull him over the console and onto me.

"Especially with my family. I think that was why I was so hesitant to come out to my parents. I knew they would be okay with it, but it still scared me to think that maybe they wouldn't understand me, that they would look at me differently. So when I suspected about Fox being gay, I wanted him to come out first to see how they would react, but while doing that I was only thinking about myself. I wasn't thinking about my brother and his own fears about coming out and I hate myself for it. That's why I was so scared about angering him with us. I didn't want him hating me again. I did a lot to him that I'm not proud of."

"If there's anything I can understand, it's doing things I'm not proud of," I told him, reaching out and grabbing his hand. "I understand you, Wren. I've done the same, probably worse."

Wren ran his thumb over the back of my hand.

"I think that was why I was so shaken when you said you loved me," Wren said in a whisper, his eyes wide and captivating. "Because I want to be loved and needed so badly that I'm scared of it, so I reject it altogether. I'm scared of it being taken away. Scared of you changing your mind or me doing something to make you not love me anymore, or to make you not want me around."

I needed to tell him I read his letter. This was killing me. He was so vulnerable right now and all I wanted to do was hold him and promise him the world.

"Listen, I–" I started.

"Please, let me finish. I need to say this," Wren interjected.

I nodded. I could let him finish his piece if that was what he wanted.

"I do love you, Landon, I do," Wren said, his voice slightly rushed like he was afraid he would stop himself from saying it if he didn't say it quickly. "You are everything to me and I understand if you don't forgive me for the way I reacted or the way I made you feel. I'm sorry for that. But I want you to know that I love you. I did then and I do now. I... I'm forgetting what I wanted to say. I wrote it all down so this wouldn't happen, but I lost the letter."

"I found it," I told him. His eyes narrowed slightly, processing what I had just said. "I read your letter."

"How...?"

"You left it in my room, God knows how you got in there, but it was on my desk the night I came back from the hospital.'

"And you read it then?" he asked slowly.

"Yes."

"When you had a concussion?"

I nodded. "It probably made my head hurt even more."

"So, you already knew how I felt and didn't say anything."

I laughed in his face. "Wren, you didn't let me! You were barely letting me move a few days ago let alone have a conversation like this."

"Well, you were concussed," he said, sounding more like himself. "You still are."

"So you can't be mad at me for not saying anything."

"I'm not mad," he assured me, bringing our joined hands up to his mouth and kissing my knuckles. "Perhaps, I feel a little foolish though."

I chuckled, resting my head on the head rest, still turned facing him.

"No need," I said. "The letter is beautiful, it's... everything."

"You still have it?"

"Of course, I still have it."

Wren nodded. "Keep it."

My love for Wren was all consuming. I never thought this was in the cards for me, that I would be here with a man that I was in love with and feeling so much happier than I knew was possible.

"I love you too, by the way," I said, grinning over at him. I couldn't pull the smile off my face. "And I forgive you."

Wren grinned back at me, squeezing my hand.

"Well, that's a relief," he said.

Here with him was where I wanted to be. I always thought I wanted to leave this place, get out from under my father's thumb, and leave everyone I knew behind thinking that would somehow fix my life. What I really needed was to let myself be *me* and I could always be that with Wren, no matter where we were. I let myself thaw out, cracked the ice around my heart, and transformed into who I really wanted to be.

"Have you ever thought about leaving here?" I asked him after a few moments of us staring out at the ocean. "Going somewhere nobody knows you? I used to think about it all the time."

Wren pondered for a moment, turning to face me again.

"I always thought here was where I wanted to stay. Go to Brown, stay close to my family," he began. "But now... now I think that anywhere you are is

where I want to be. I'd follow you anywhere, change our names, start a new life, if that was what you wanted."

I could feel my cheeks heating. I reached over and shoved him lightly in the chest.

"Jesus, when did you get so cheesy?" I asked him with a chuckle.

He grinned, pulling me to him by the collar of my shirt before planting his lips on mine.

"Wren, just so you know," I started, smiling over at him as the moonlight glistened in his eyes. "I'll always want you around."

**

Last chapter! Leave your thoughts. Epilogue is next to wrap everything up.

Epilogue

Landon Reilly

I was light as air skating through the rink at the end of hockey practice, picking up the loose pucks and cones that were left behind. I always loved skating, even if I didn't always love the game. I loved gliding over the ice, feeling a rush of freedom.

My second season of hockey at Providence College was better than the last. I was one of the alternate captains, a last wish from Rojas to the coaches before he graduated and left the team to pursue graduate school. We started the season winning more games than we had the last, so morale was up with the guys. It actually felt like a team this year instead of a group of cliques being forced to work together.

That, of course, was in part because of Shea, our new captain now that Rojas had left, and because Cooper had transferred out of Providence College before the start of the year. Cooper's clique had dissolved, and Shea wasn't one to let any petty bullshit slide. Now we were close to the end of the season with a potential to go to the Frozen Four.

Shea skated up behind me, holding out a bucket for me to drop the pucks in.

"Hey," he greeted. "You still having that thing tonight?"

I nodded. "Yeah, we are. You and Tara are coming?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Shea said with a smile.

Tara was Shea's girlfriend who had befriended Wren early on in the season. The two of them had bonded over their mutual hatred for hockey and love for reading. I hadn't realized how close the two had gotten until one day about a month into the season I texted Wren to ask what he was doing and his response was "Book club with Tara." Now the two hung out all the time

and sat together at every home game along with a couple other girlfriends of the players.

With Shea mentioning it, I realized I had to hurry up and get back to Wren's apartment before everyone else got there.

For their junior year, Wren, Stella, James, and Anthony rented an apartment together close to campus. I was a little skeptical of the arrangement at first, but it seemed to be working out. Anthony begrudgingly got along with Wren now that he was living with him. Also, because he sort of had to considering he was my friend and James's boyfriend so there would be no avoiding Wren even if he wasn't living at the same apartment.

It was crazy how much could go on in a year.

I spent much of the summer contemplating whether I wanted to continue playing hockey, and of course, my know it all boyfriend gave me advice that actually ended up working even though I was hesitant at first. Wren wanted me to figure out whether or not I played hockey because I loved it or because I thought I did, so he suggested I make a list of pros and cons: what I love about hockey and what I hate about it.

I loved the feeling of skating, I loved being good at something and having something to be proud of. I loved the competition and being on a team when it wasn't toxic. I hated the way my father wanted me to play and I hated that he tainted everything in my life. So the decision became clear after that. What I loved about hockey outweighed what I didn't. And for the first time in my life, I could play hockey for myself and not for my father. I didn't want it to be another thing that my father had taken from me.

Wren had also showed me a job posting to work at a youth hockey camp over the summer. And when I got the job there, my heart swelled with love for the game I didn't even realize I had. With the money from that, I was finally able to buy my own car so I didn't have to rely on Wren for rides anymore. It was a cheap old thing, but it was mine so I didn't care.

Once I was showered and changed, I went out to my car and threw my bag in the backseat before heading back to my dorm room to quickly change

into something a little nicer and pick up Jess.

I was able to get a single room this year, which was incredibly tiny, but it was worth it for the times Wren and I wanted to be alone when everyone was at his apartment. Jess was living in the same building as me, on a different floor, as an RA.

Jess was already waiting outside my door by the time I got back to my room. She tapped on her wrist when she saw me, signaling that we were tight on time.

"I know, I know," I said rushing down the hall to my door. "I just need to get changed quick."

"You better hurry up," she said. "It won't be a good look if Wren's own boyfriend is late to his surprise party. If we don't get there soon, he's going to be there before we are."

"I need one minute and then I'm good."

I quickly unlocked the door and threw all my stuff down before going over to my closet. I pulled out a white t-shirt and a dark blue cardigan sweater Wren had gotten me for Christmas. Then I threw on black loose fitting jeans, ran my hands through my hair, and grabbed my keys before heading out the door.

"I'm ready," I said to Jess, who was leaning on the wall next to my door and looking at her phone.

"Stella said he's not home yet," she said, locking her phone and walking with me down the hall and out to my car.

"I know. He texted me," I replied, showing her my phone screen with a text from Wren.

From: Wren

Good evening, love. I hope practice went well. I just left therapy. I'm heading to my P.O. box, then I was thinking I could pick you up and we

could grab some dinner. Let me know. Love you.

I locked my phone and put it in my pocket, feeling a little guilty for ignoring his text. But I would be seeing him soon anyway, so I didn't let the guilt last.

Wren was going to his P.O. box to pick up the final copy of his book before it went out for publication. Last year, Wren had gotten in touch with a literary agent and got his book picked up by a publisher. After a year of deadlines and edits, his book was going out to print and would release later this year. That was what we were all celebrating tonight; Wren's book finally being finished and ready for publication.

It was an incredible accomplishment, but Wren acted modest about it. He didn't like talking about his work too much, but his friends and I wanted to show him how proud we were. So while he might feel a little awkward at first about a surprise party, I was confident he would warm up to it. There was no way he would have let us throw him a party if he had known we were doing it.

I drove the two of us to the apartment near the Brown campus and parked a little down the road, hoping Wren wouldn't notice my car when he pulled up.

I sent him a quick text when we got there.

To: Wren

practice ran late. meet at ur place?

Because Wren was the type to just show up at my dorm, I had to make sure he would actually come back to his apartment.

Jess and I got out of the car and went up to the apartment. Stella opened the door for us with an exasperated look.

"Finally!" she exclaimed, pulling her girlfriend inside. I followed and shut the door behind me. "I was beginning to get worried he would show up

before you two even got here.

I looked around the room and saw Shea and his girlfriend Tara had somehow beaten me here. They sat on the couch with one of my other teammates, Bryan, and his girlfriend Joanna who was also friends with Wren.

Then Fox and Elijah came out of the kitchen and stood in front of me.

"There you are!" Elijah said with a grin. "Your friends are very nice."

I felt slightly guilty that the two of them had been here before me. They hadn't met anyone here until tonight, though apparently Fox had briefly spoken to James and Stella over Instagram messages at one point. But the two of them didn't seem bothered.

"Yeah, thanks for coming," I said, looking between the two of them, burying my hands in my pockets.

My relationship with Fox was still strange, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it had been. There was more of an understanding between us. The two of us weren't the best of friends, but we could make conversation when we were around each other. Elijah probably had a lot to do with Fox changing his attitude toward me.

Wren and I had spent quite a bit of time together over the summer, so Fox and Elijah were around a lot. During the Ridley family vacation, Wren had tricked Fox and me into doing some of the house chores together in an effort to make us get along and it worked. Sort of. We were civil with one another.

"Your hockey season's looking pretty good," Fox commented before taking a sip of his drink.

I let out a short laugh. "Better than last year. On and off the ice."

Fox nodded in understanding. I didn't know how much he knew about my season last year, if he even knew anything at all. He and Wren had been

talking a lot more lately, ever since we all went on vacation this summer, but I didn't really know what was said between the two.

"You and Wren should try to come up to Boston for a Bruins game when you have some time off!" Elijah exclaimed suddenly. "Maybe some time over winter break? That'd be so fun."

"I don't know how much fun Wren would have, but it'd be fun for me," I joked.

"You haven't turned him into a hockey lover yet?" Elijah asked.

"I think he secretly likes it," I told him with a grin. "He pretends to hate it, but he's always there when we're playing at home."

Fox snorted. "That's just because he loves you. And probably because he wants to get laid."

Elijah slapped his shoulder and scolded him for his comment.

"What is all this?"

I turned at the sound of Wren's voice. He stood in the doorway, holding a package under his arm and his car keys in his hand. He looked around the room with a confused expression as if he couldn't fathom why we would all be gathered here.

James got to him first and I wanted to knock him out of the way.

"Surprise!" James exclaimed, throwing his arms up. He went in to hug him, but Wren stopped him, holding his hand up.

"Where is Landon?" Wren asked.

I excused myself from Fox and Elijah and walked over to the doorway where Wren stood. I grabbed his free hand and pulled him further into the apartment, kicking the door shut behind us. Wren still looked confused, but he accepted my quick kiss on the mouth anyway.

"We're celebrating," I told him, leaning to speak into his ear.

"Celebrating what?"

"You! You being done with edits. Your book getting published," I explained, laughing. He looked around the room to see all the people gathered.

It wasn't *that* many people, but it was enough to occupy the small space in the apartment. When Wren's book published, we would have a bigger party with his whole family and all our friends, but this was all we could do with the space we had at the moment.

"Oh," Wren replied and my stomach dropped. I pulled him to the side, shooting a look at James who thankfully understood and distracted everybody so I could talk to Wren.

"Are you upset?" I asked him, the two of us standing in the corner of the kitchen. He placed the package and his keys down on the counter.

"No," he denied, shaking his head. "I just didn't expect this. I wanted to open the book together."

"We can," I assured him. "We can open it now."

"I'd rather it just be the two of us," he said.

Now I was feeling guilty. I had ruined whatever plans he had for the night all because I thought he deserved to be celebrated. He didn't even want this.

"Hey, hey," Wren said, cupping my face in his hands. My eyes stared into his, looking miserable I was sure. Wren smiled at that. "Why are you upset?"

"Because I'm the worst boyfriend ever and ruined your night by throwing you a party you didn't want and didn't ask for."

Wren shook his head at me, my face still in his hands.

"I'm happy, love, just surprised which I'm sure was the point," he said, smoothing his thumbs over my cheeks. "I'm lucky to have someone as thoughtful as you."

"Well, I can't take all the credit," I muttered. "Stella and James helped."

Wren laughed, pulling me in for a quick kiss.

"You can't take all the credit, but you were going to take all the blame if I was unhappy?" he asked, his face still close to mine.

"You know how my mind works."

"Yeah, I do," he replied, removing his hands from my face and taking one of my hands in his. "Let's stop being anti-social."

Wren and I walked through the apartment, greeting everyone who was there.

"I was thinking," Tara started, sitting close to Wren on the couch. "When your book comes out, it should *totally* be the book club pick of the month. Wouldn't that be awesome?"

"Absolutely not," Wren denied, shaking his head at her. "Once this book is out, I'm never reading it again."

"Boo," Tara replied with a thumbs down.

We ended up talking to Anthony and James for a little while on the other side of the room.

"I can't believe you were actually doing work when you were at the coffee shop," Anthony commented. "I totally thought you were faking the whole time."

"And I thought you were just watching porn with how much time you spent on your laptop," James added, snickering with Anthony.

"You two are hilarious," Wren said in a dry tone. "Made for each other, truly."

James threw his arm around Anthony and planted a loud kiss on his cheek.

A moment later there was a knock on the door. James shot us a confused look before going over to open it, revealing Wren's sisters, Raven and Fawn, and Livi on the other side.

While I was happy to see them, I was confused about their presence. I hadn't thought to invite Raven, which now made me feel like an asshole, but clearly *someone* had invited her.

"Hope you don't mind I extended the invitation," Fox said, coming to stand beside me as the girls made their way over to us.

"No, this is great," I said, smiling over at him.

"Sorry we're late," Raven said, hugging Wren who just shrugged.

While Wren talked with his siblings, I took a moment to greet Livi, giving her a tight hug. Ever since moving out of our parents' house and in with the Hansons, Livi had changed drastically. She was no longer terrifyingly thin with a look of innocence.

She had cut her hair short so that it didn't pass her chin and dyed it black. Her makeup was done with dark colors, thick eyeliner and dark red lipstick that almost looked black. Despite all these dark changes in appearance, she seemed happier than ever.

After she had turned evidence of the abuse she suffered from our parents to the police last year, she was able to get fostered by the Hansons. This didn't go without pushback from our parents who fought to have their daughter brought back to their home, but there was nothing they could do. There was evidence of abuse toward Livi, and Livi clearly stated that she didn't feel safe living in that home, so any judge that they saw wasn't going to place her back with our parents.

"I like the new hair," I told her as we pulled away from our hug.

Livi brushed some hair behind her ear, but it just fell back to the place it was before.

"It's taking some getting used to," she said. "It's always getting in my face, but I like how it looks now. It feels more me."

"It looks good," I assured her. "How are Anne and Matthew?"

"They're good. They miss you and Micah."

Anne and Matthew Hanson were a miracle for Livi and me. What they had done for us by taking the two of us in was something I'd never be able to repay, but would try to anyway. They had saved us both.

After a while, people started heading out and saying their goodbyes and congratulations to Wren. Surprisingly, Fox and Elijah were the last to leave. Wren and Fox were standing in the corner talking quietly by themselves.

"Any idea what they're talking about?" I asked Elijah, who stood across the room with me.

He shook his head. "Nope, but neither one looks mad, so I'm taking that as a good sign."

I hummed in agreement.

"They're getting along a lot better now," Elijah added with a smile. "They were so hostile to each other when I was first friends with Fox. But I don't think either of them really wanted to be. They were just both too bone-headed to talk out their problems."

"A lot has changed," I said, glancing over at the two of them for a moment before looking back at Elijah,

He grinned. " *Everything* changed. But it's been good changes. Two years ago, I never thought I'd be able to have the life that I have now, but it's here."

Of course, I had similar feelings, but I was too afraid to speak them out loud because it would make me emotional. I didn't need to be standing here and crying to Elijah when so much of his own pain was caused by me. And although he had forgiven me for it, it was hard for me to forgive myself. I didn't know if I would ever be able to.

Wren and Fox wrapped up their conversation and shared a quick hug before Fox and Elijah said their goodbyes and left. James and Anthony had already retired to their room, so Wren and I were cleaning up with Stella and Jess.

When we were finally alone in Wren's room, he wanted to open the package with his book inside.

"You really didn't want to show this to everyone?" I asked, sitting down on his bed.

"They'll see it when the book comes out," he said with a a shrug, carefully opening the box.

Wren slid the book out of the box and ran his hand over the cover. I got up from the bed and stood beside him so I could get a good look.

The cover design was a brick university building with vines of ivy twined around it with the title *Poison Ivy* at the top and Wren's name written at the bottom.

I remembered Wren being so stressed about picking the title for his book. There were multiple title ideas that were floating around between him and his editors and he was worried they wouldn't go with the right one.

The book took place at an ivy league school and was a dark campus novel about the toxicity and elitism in higher education. There were secret societies, murder, crazy professors, and lots of drama. There was a character named Lance, who had a love affair with the main character, which reminded me a lot of Wren.

Wren opened the book, turning it away from me. He read the page he was on, then turned his eyes up to look at me.

"What?" I asked.

He shoved the book in my hands without answering. The book was open to the dedication page.

It read: *To my family and friends. Your love and support will never go unnoticed.*

And the line below: *To L, my love, my light, my life. It was your love that kept me going even when I doubted myself. This book is yours, and so am I.*

I looked up at him, my mouth parted slightly. He was staring at me with a blank expression, waiting for my reaction. I could tell he was feeling vulnerable at that moment, that he needed reassurance from me.

"You sappy bastard," I said, putting the book down and pulling him into my arms.

"You think it's okay?" he asked, wrapping his arms around my waist.

"It's perfect." I laid a kiss on his forehead.

"Good, because I can't change it now, so if you hated it then that'd be too bad."

"How could I hate that my hot author boyfriend dedicated his book to me?"

Wren contemplated for a moment. "You're right. That would be impossible to hate. You should be happy that I'm so romantic and thoughtful."

I couldn't even pretend to be annoyed at his arrogance.

"I am happy," I said.

Wren grinned and let his hands travel behind my back until they squeezed my ass.

"You want me to stay the night?" I asked him as he stared kissing my jaw.

"What a silly question," he said against my skin, backing us up until we reached his bed.

It was like my whole life, through all the hardships, pain, and tears, had led me to this moment, this man, this life. I stopped being a religious person, but sometimes I had to think that these things happened for a reason, that life gave me my set of circumstances that would lead me to where I was supposed to be.

I looked at him and everything felt worth it.

Here, with Wren, was exactly where I was supposed to end up.

**

THE END.

Thank you all for reading! I'm so happy that I got to share this book with so many of you. Thank you to everyone who has read this book, but especially the people who have been here since the beginning. I started posting this book in January of 2022 and some of you stuck with me for the entire time, and I couldn't be more grateful to all of you. I love these characters so much. Wren and Landon are my favorite couple that I have written so far and I'm going to miss them so much. I'm so sad that it's over, but I can't believe that I've finished my FOURTH book!!!

I hope you all enjoyed the Epilogue.

Please leave questions for a Q&A chapter here!

Q&A

Thank you for all your questions! Sorry if I didn't answer your question, I got lazy after a while and skipped some that I already had answered from other questions.

PixelatedQuota Q: What was your biggest challenge while writing this book?

A: Getting the plot where I wanted it to be. The plot changed a lot from what I originally had planned, so I was sort of replanning and outlining while I was writing and that was difficult and also made chapters come out slower. I got the result I always wanted, but it was just getting to certain plot points that I struggled with. I also originally wanted this book to be way shorter (like 30 chapters) and I struggled with condensing it, obviously, since it's like 20ish chapters longer than I wanted it to be.

Karixme Q: All of your books are connected, but for this one what was your main idea that started it all? What has been your favorite chapter in the story?

sellmysoul2bewithu Q: What was your favorite scene to write for this book?

A: I wouldn't say all my books are "connected." They just all take place around the same area and around the same time. The idea for this story came about because I just really wanted to have Wren as a main character. I would say I was pretty close to the end of On Thin Ice when I got the idea for Wren and Landon which is why Landon gets a bit of a redemption at the end of that book. My favorite chapters to write are always the scenes that I have had planned from the beginning because it's super satisfying to finally be able to write the scene (I don't like pre-writing scenes), so in this book one of the biggest scenes was Fox confronting Wren about Landon. I love any scene with the brothers because I love writing about siblings. The other big scenes that had been planned since the beginning were Landon

confronting Wren about the "I love you" thing, Landon getting hurt by his dad and Wren going there and confronting the dad, and Wren writing the love letter.

whoisdaisyjones Q: What intrigued you about Landon and Wren in the first place?

A: I just loved writing Wren's character so much in On Thin Ice, I knew I wanted to write him a book. I felt like he would be a waste of a character just to have him as a side character in someone else's book. I just thought that putting him with Landon made sense and it would make for a good book since it would cause a lot of drama. Obviously Landon has a lot of layers to him and I thought he would be a good character to dive deeper into. They both have big personalities. It just made sense in my head. I can't pinpoint the exact moment that I thought of it.

donteatbutter123 Q: Will there be an Anthony and James book?

lhnfiwtw Q: Will James and Anthony get a book? If not, will it be different characters from this book or new people?

A: No. I'm sorry to all who want an Anthony and James book, but they were just some fun side characters I put in here for a little more drama. I think we know all there is to know about them and they're back together now as of the end of this book, so I have no idea what I would write about if I were to write them a book.

My next book is about brand new characters.

justinshero Q: Do we think Landon and his mom ever reconnected/had a conversation to kinda give them closure? Did Livi end it with Jimmy?

A: I'm not sure that Landon will reconnect with his mother. I don't think that he feels the need for closure because he just sees her as someone who was complicit in his abuse. She didn't protect him and then she was awful to his sister. For him, there's no forgiving that and he wants to move on. As for Livi and Jimmy, they're done.

HmmUhhIdk Q: Will there be another chapter where it's them in the future? Like a wedding?

geminigirl32 Q: Will there be bonus chapters?

letsplayludo Q: Will there be extra chapters?

A: There will be bonus chapters. There may or may not be a wedding involved.

user86655468 Q: Did you plan on this couple when you were writing On Thin Ice? Or after finishing the story you found that they were a good couple?

minighostie_ Q: Was this story inspired while you were writing OTI or before it?

A: It was toward the end of On Thin Ice that I decided I was going to write them as a couple. Somewhere around chapter 46.

idontcare13333 Q: Will we get chapters from Wren's POV?

A: If you're asking about for bonus chapters, the answer is probably. It depends what I come up with for the chapters.

Toasty_Tea913 Q: Did any major original plans ever end up changing as you continued to write?

A: YES!! Wren and Landon were originally supposed to be friends with benefits for a while. That was like the whole plot when I first thought of this story. They were supposed to be friends with benefits, Landon would fall first and Wren would push him away. I kinda turned away from that plot because it was going to be more smutty than I wanted it to be. Fox and the rest of the family weren't supposed to find out about Landon until after Christmas and I was struggling with figuring out how to make them all find out. As I was plotting it out, them all finding out happened before Christmas. Wren was supposed to take a trip to Boston to talk to Fox after Fox found out to try to fix things between them.

German774 Q: Does Landon's dad ever get legal consequences for the fucked up things he did? Does Landon ever bottom? Would there be a bonus chapter of them and Fox and Elijah on a double date?

A: The consequence Landon's dad gets is that his daughter doesn't have to live with him anymore, so he lost both of his kids. The police did get involved with removing Livi from their care, but the only evidence she had was what they had done to her, not what the dad had done to Landon so there were no legal consequences for that.

Originally, there was going to be a scene where Landon bottomed, but I couldn't find a spot for it so I just got rid of it, so I'd say he eventually does.

There could potentially be a double date bonus chapter.

Aloserlikeme182 Q: Do you think Landon's parents would ever change their views, maybe when they've grown older, and have gone many, many years without speaking to their children?

A: I think that they are too set in their ways. Landon's father will blame Landon's sexuality on why he turned out the way he did and he'll blame Landon for why Livi left. I don't think Landon's father thinks he did anything wrong. Their mother might be a little different and regret losing the both of them and grow to resent her husband for it.

voidstylidia Q: Do you think you'll ever publish these books?

A: I don't think I will, at least not right now. They need MAJOR revisions (all my books on here are technically first drafts) and they need to be cut way down because they're super long for traditionally published romance books. I'd rather focus on writing more new stories than fixing these ones to try to get them published, but that could change in the future. I'm just not sure yet, but there are no plans.

Beeps21 Q: What will be your next book?

Gavinhe Q: Do you have plans for a next book?

A: My next book is called "Alone Together" and I'll start posting it soon. I also have plans for two more books that are interconnected, but not connected with any of my other books (kind of like how On Thin Ice and Ice Cold are connected).

UKILOVEIT Q: Will you make a book for Jake?

A: I'm going to be honest. I did have plans to write a Jake book and I have even written a couple chapters of it, but I never got further than that. I want to say there's a slight possibility that I write a book for him, but it's very slight at this point. I've kind of already closed the door on it. I'd rather focus on the new ideas I have.

telleryazmine Q: What makes Landon and Wren your favorite couple?

A: I just had the most fun writing them. I think they're the most interesting couple out of all the ones I've written, partly because of their complicated history. I also just feel like they're two guys that probably shouldn't work as a couple, but do, and I love couples like that.

Unknown-Number- Q: What do you see Landon doing with his life post college?

A: He might continue working at a youth hockey camp over the summers during school and that could inspire him to open his own hockey camp/facility so he could continue with hockey after school without having to try for the NHL.

myboywoowon Q: When is the wedding?

A: Some day.

telleryazmine Q: Have you ever gotten super emotional while writing/creating Landon's story? Were there moments when you had to take breaks from writing his story so the you could recuperate and finish writing?

A: No, his whole story lived in my mind for a long time, so it wasn't particularly emotional for me to write it. I don't tend to get emotional when I'm writing. I do when I'm reading things, but I think writing is kind of in a different head space for me so it doesn't make me emotional.

guccigasms Q: What were the sequence of events that led to James and Anthony finally getting together?

A: James finally realizing how bad he wanted Anthony and he got jealous seeing him with other guys at the bar, which made Anthony mad, then James kissed him the next day in front of Wren and Landon. They talked after that and they agreed not to commit to anything with each other before going on winter break and they would talk again after the break. They kept in touch during their winter break and even visited each other at some points, then when they got back to school they reconnected.

amboisemiloveda Q: Are you going to be doing any side stories of our favorite characters or couples? What's everyone's majors? What are their hopes and dreams?

A: There's always a potential for bonus chapters for any of my books. If something comes to me, I'll write it.

Wren's major is cognitive science, Landon is undecided but will probably go into some type of business major. I don't know their hopes and dreams.

huaaaerxl Q: Do you see Landon and Wren growing old together?

A: Yes, I think they're together for the long haul.

Arizaaaidk Q: Will Wren and Landon have a baby and if so, what would be the name?

A: I don't know if I see them having kids to be honest.

Zuray Q: Will there ever be a bonus chapter of when Landon got outed at church?

A: Probably not. I was going to do a flashback scene to this moment in this book, but I decided against it.

lancexwrench Q: What does Wren think about being Landon's first person he ever had sex with?

A: I don't think he thinks about that much. He's confident that he and Landon make each other feel good, so it doesn't really matter to him that he's the only one he's been with in that way.

IS483LL4 Q: Was Wren and Landon being together something you had in mind before you started posting On Thin Ice? Were they always meant to be together?

Would there be a bonus chapter where Landon and Livi visit Peter (their dad) in jail if he's faced with legal consequences?

Was this book going to be a slow burn like how you thought On Thin Ice was going to be?

Will there be a bonus chapter where Wren and Landon adopt a pet or a child?

A: No, I didn't decide this until toward the end of On Thin Ice. I didn't always have a plan for them. To be honest, when I first started writing On Thin Ice, neither of them even existed in my head.

No, there won't be a chapter like this because their dad isn't in jail. There could be a chapter where they interact with him again, but I don't know yet.

Yes and no. This book was supposed to be shorter, but it was also supposed to have Wren and Landon as friends with benefits and not getting together until toward the end of the book.

There could be a pet chapter!

vedica02 Q: Were there some things you wanted to write differently but didn't for some reason?

A: Yeah, there were some things that didn't really pan out the way I thought they would, but that happens a lot. Sometimes as I'm writing, I get to a spot where I need something to happen, but it wouldn't make sense within the context I created so I have to tweak it. This happened with the whole part about Wren's family finding out about Landon.

Dekuspamms Q: Are all of your books in the same universe?

A: Kind of. I want to say yes, but I hesitate because I don't want people to take that answer and think I'm hinting toward crossovers. I have no plans to write any crossovers. I didn't write these books thinking about them *not* being in the same universe.

boobsiess Q: Will there be any more spinoffs in the universe?

A: I don't currently have plans for any spinoffs.

january87432 Q: Full middle names for the Ridleys.

A: Robin Leonard Ridley, Raven Lilian Ridley, Wren Lucas Ridley, Fox Lee Ridley, Fawn Lydia Ridley, Colt Liam Ridley.

gaybagpipe Q: Do any of your characters remind you of yourself?

A: I think there's a little bit of me in all of them, but I don't think any of them are 100% me writing myself into the story.

rab4life Q: Were there real people that inspired Landon and Wren in your life or just imaginary? Which character would you say you relate to the most out of all your books?

A: They're just imaginary. I don't know anyone like them.

I probably relate the most to Carson.

axesmellsterrible Q: Are there any scenes/moments you decided to eliminate from the story or any that were included that you considered taking out?

A: There are a couple flashbacks to Landon's life with his father that I eliminated just because I felt like some of them were things we already knew (like him being outed at church) and having the flashback wouldn't add anything to the story, so I took them out. There's nothing in the book that I considered taking out.